

***Should Arts Be Politically Committed?***  
***A Case Study on the Criticism of “People’s Justice” Artwork in Documenta Fifteen***

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**Abstract**

Documenta Fifteen in Kassel, Germany, curated by Ruangrupa, immediately became the world's attention after the boycott of an art installation accused of having anti-Semitic views. Schaap (2011) argues that strict social hierarchies continue to be practiced culturally to suppress and deny the intelligence of small groups who may not have the basic knowledge to understand their world. Meanwhile, Rancière argued that the essence of politics itself is through acts of resistance to the 'police' by providing opportunities for marginalized groups in the intellectual hierarchy to speak. Then, what kind of freedom is ideal to provide space for artists or writers to express their thoughts and ideas? What if their views contradict the values agreed upon by the majority group? In this paper, I will analyze Rancière's thoughts about political aesthetics and the distribution of sensible as a framework to deal with the criticism of the artwork entitled "People's Justice" by Taring Padi which was exhibited at Documenta Fifteen in Kassel, Germany in 2022. Should art have a political commitment? And if so, what is the relationship between politics and aesthetics? Through a qualitative descriptive method, I invite readers to reflect on Rancière's thoughts on understanding an art or artwork, despite the eventual need to reach a dissensus.

Keywords: Art Criticism, Documenta Fifteen, Distribution of the Sensible

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## Introduction

Art and literature are often driven by political interests. May (2008) stated that relationships between art and politics have always existed. For Rancière, the link between politics and aesthetics lies in the very idea itself. Politics is a question of aesthetics, a matter of appearances. Politics and subject (citizens) are one entity in two separate terms. Politics can only be understood by presupposing an idea about the subject, thus the subject can only work within a political framework. Politics is seen as a vehicle for freedom, and freedom only arises in action, therefore the freedom of the state subject must be understood as 'freedom in action' not freedom in metaphysical presuppositions as understood in the view of liberalism.

Rancière (2010) views politics as something that must be defined separately, not predicted by others or by power. Art, in its essence, cannot predict or foresee the impact that its methods of undermining authority may or may not have on the shaping of political identification. Art has the ability to produce a fresh visual landscape and a new structure of understanding, yet these advancements serve to redefine the realm of ordinary encounters as a realm of collective and impersonal encounters. In this paper, I would like to analyze how Rancière's thoughts on the aesthetic of politics and the distribution of the sensible influence the criticism of "People's Justice" artwork by *Taring Padi* that was exhibited in the Documenta Fifteen in Kassel, Germany. This, so to speak, then prompts further questions: Should arts be politically committed? And if so, how are politics and aesthetics related? To begin answering those questions, let us re-interpret Plato's thoughts on works of art. Plato distinguishes between planned art and inspired art based on the creative process and functional art and beautiful art based on its type (Beardsley, 1985).

Planned art carries beauty, order, proportion, and planning. Inspirational art carries the grip of emotions and forces beyond humans (artists and spectators). In Plato's view, poetry and song are types of inspiring art that carry emotion and are far from the rationality that is being offered to the Greek polis society at that time. Although Plato rejected poetry and song (rhapsode), he was ambiguous by allowing poetry and song in favor of the State (hymn). This kind of dualism of art can be seen in Nietzsche's view which reveals two faces of art, namely Apollonian art and Dionysian art. Apollonian art is a type of art that reflects beauty, order, refinement, carries the dream world. While Dionysian art is a rebellious, dynamic, intoxicating art as Nietzsche stated:

There are two conditions in which art appears in man like a force of nature and disposes of him whether he will or no: as the compulsion to have vision and as a compulsion to an orgiastic state. Both conditions are rehearsed in ordinary life, too, but weaker: in dream and in intoxication. (Nietzsche, 1967, p.419-420)

Modernism has defined art and made a distinction between art and not art, between beautiful and unbeautiful art, between high art and low art, and the like. This tendency of separation in the polar opposite (binary opposition) about art has made us busy looking for definitions of what is an art and what is not art. Rancière separates the political involvement of artists from what he means by aesthetics. The link between the aesthetic and the political is not in the ideological involvement of the actors, but in the innovation and subjectification process that occurs to the audience. Aesthetics refers to a specific regime for identifying and reflecting on the arts: a mode of articulation between ways of doing and making, their corresponding forms of visibility, and possible ways of thinking about their relationships (Rancière, 2004).

Aesthetics is the distribution of the sensible. Rancière refers to the Holocaust event that changed the way humans view the body, as a result of thousands of mutilations displayed through visuals and visualizations. He saw that the form of art determined what the artist wanted and for what reason. This is why Rancière separated the interests of neutralizing art by making it articulate to convey a message to the world, or by withdrawing it from that particular realm and using it as a tool for direct intervention in its increasingly poor-quality environment. In Rancière's view, he finds this historically revolutionary art in critical art, which always seeks to contest domination by creating a sensitivity to alienation. This kind of critical art form is intended to encourage the viewer to look for reasons for this alienation in contradiction to the world around them. Thus, it has moved to action. If the deduction is done directly by the artists, then the art system has lost its substance and the artists have been trapped in direct activism.

### **Aesthetic Regime of Arts**

Rancière has a concept in which he argues that in order to voice that which previously did not have room to speak, the subject must perform an act of subjectification where he must fight the police or the structures and rules that dominate at the time so that what was previously unheard will have the opportunity to be heard (Rancière, 2004). The concept of equality that is recognized through aesthetics is the main premise of Rancière's writings that discuss aesthetic and literary philosophy (Riedner, 2012). Rancière does not approve of any kind of action that he thinks seeks to represent the proletariat, the poor, or those who are considered not to have high intellectual abilities to voice their voices (Rancière, 2004).

According to Rancière, the essence of politics itself is through acts of resistance to the police by providing opportunities for marginalized people in an intellectual hierarchy to speak. Based on these problems, Rancière (2004) argues that the ideal literary work is writing that is in the aesthetic regime of the arts. He divides regimes into schemes, namely ethical regime, representative regime, and aesthetic regime of the arts. The ethical regime according to Rancière is related to artistic images that are evaluated based on their usefulness in society. In an ethical regime, literary or artistic works have an educational function and then hinder the creation of the authority of art or literary works. It can be assumed that the ethical regime then places literature only as a product of labor and has no political content. The second regime is the representative regime, replacing the ethical regime, the representative regime is a new innovation in combining art and labor. In this regime, art or literature is given its own scope with its own rules, and its position is above the product of ordinary labor. But then this representative regime develops into forms of normativity that define conditions which according to its imitation can be recognized as art exclusively and evaluated through this framework, as good or bad, adequate or inadequate, as well as differences between genres according to what is represented. The third regime is the aesthetic regime of the arts which according to Rancière is able to express what is silent or unheard in it.

The aesthetic regime of art is a form of effort to achieve the equality that Rancière wants to achieve. In the aesthetic regime, art or literary works are considered as independent without being tied to any rules, hierarchies, or assumptions. Art or literature is not limited by the demand to educate and as a product of labor, but also not to be shackled by certain bourgeois exclusive content that distinguishes it from everyday life. It is in this aesthetic regime of art that allows for the emergence of aesthetic politics. Efforts to achieve equality can be achieved in this regime because in the end, the freedom offered by this regime is able to provide space

for those who were previously unheard of because they were pressured by the police order to finally be voiced through art or literature.

### **Case Study: “People’s Justice” Artwork at Documenta Fifteen**

The documenta fifteen in Kassel, Germany, curated by Ruangrupa, immediately became the world's attention after the decline of the installation art entitled "People's Justice" by the *Taring Padi* from Indonesia. The artwork is accused of being a tool of anti-Semitism. The work is in the form of a banner about twelve meters long and eight meters high which is packed with mixed figures which was created twenty years ago. There was strong reaction in both Germany and Israel. On Twitter, the Israeli embassy derided the artwork as "Goebbels' old-style propaganda" while Germany's Minister of Culture declared that she had been "betrayed" by documenta's management and curators, who had ensured anti-Semitism had no place at the exhibition. Hours after that comment, Documenta organizers had covered the art piece with a black sheet. This did not prevent the Exhibition Supervisory Board, which included the Mayor of Kassel, Christian Geselle, from holding a meeting and deciding to remove the artwork.

This event re-examines the intersection between curators, artists, the works of art they create and external parties, including and especially the authorities, the media, and politically and ideologically opposing parties—to interpret one work. Sabine Schormann, Director General of Documenta, told the news magazine *Det Spiegel* that organizers did not screen any artwork beforehand, out of respect for artistic freedom. In June 2022, the management of Documenta Fifteen in Kassel decided to remove the artwork from *Taring Padi*, an art collective from Yogyakarta, Indonesia. The work entitled "People's Justice" deserved criticism because it features two figures with anti-Semitic stereotypes. However, so far there are no critics from Germany or Europe in general who are interested in issues beyond that which are also closely related if we look back that this artwork actually shows the context of the New Order dictatorship in Indonesia from 1965 to 1998.

Ruangrupa had been highlighted by the international media, not only because they manage the Documenta art festival as a curatorial team. However, the way the world's largest art event was managed by ruangrupa and the committee had become a public issue that had even been termed an 'art disaster' by the media landscape, especially Germany. Ruangrupa had been heavily criticized for being unclear about their position on the theme of antisemitism. Since the beginning of 2022 before Documenta was held, ruangrupa had not succeeded in breaking the allegation to support the anti-Jewish pattern by curating the Documenta festival. At that time, the Documenta management team had been warned by the German public and politics not to harbor anti-Semitic thoughts. In fact, ruangrupa allowed the Taring Padi collective to exhibit mural works the size of billboards, which has drawn public criticism, especially in Europe. The work, entitled “People's Justice”, depicts a soldier with a pig's head wearing a scarf bearing the image of 'Star of David' and a helmet bearing the words 'Mossad'. The figure of speech that is considered anti-Semitic is also seen in other figures which depict a male figure with the symbol 'SS' on a hat. In the context of German history, any art that is not reflective and contains racist content (especially anti-Jewish) is strongly rejected by the public. With the image of the canine-toothed figures and the crooked nose of the figures found in the Taring Padi painting, it is enough to give a caricature impression that was often used by

the Nazis to discredit the Jews. In a public statement, the Israeli Embassy in Germany stated that the work was no different from the caricature agitation during the Nazi era.<sup>1</sup>

Before accusations of anti-Semitism against these works became public, the President of the Republic of Germany, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, had emphasized in a speech at the opening of Documenta that the German public would not tolerate art that is reckless on the issue of anti-Semitism. Despite having been warned by the German President, allegations of anti-Semitism (which previously had not been resolved by Documenta management team) resurfaced and sparked a negative reaction by the German Chancellor. Chancellor Olaf Scholz stated that he did not want to visit the Documenta festival and considered the results of Ruangrupa's curation as 'terrible' and painful. Likewise, the Minister of Culture, Claudia Roth, continued and emphasized that he did not accept and rejected the negligence of Documenta, Ruangrupa, and those who were responsible.

The social context in this event is more complex and requires more elaboration. Of the disassembled work, Taring Padi stated:

The 'People's Justice' was painted nearly twenty years ago, and expresses our disappointment, frustration and anger as politicized art students who also lost many of our friends in the street riots of 1998 which ultimately led to the dissolution of the dictator.

The content of this work draws on the knowledge that began to emerge at that time revealing the involvement of Western democracies in exacerbating political and social instability in Indonesia in a systematic way – designed to overthrow the Indonesian Communist party and the incumbent president who sympathized with their agenda – which ultimately led to on the mass violence and genocide of 1965-1966 against at least half a million citizens, the detention of many more without trial, and the establishment of the New Order military regime.

Some Indonesian artists expressed their opinions much more dramatically on social media. They talked about state censorship and ask why *Taring Padi* and Ruangrupa didn't more strongly resist the dismantling of their work. Goenawan Mohamad, founder and senior editor of the Indonesian investigative magazine "Tempo", wondered in his popular column "catatan pinggir" how a 20-year-old image against the New Order military regime in Indonesia could suddenly be interpreted in its entirety as "anti-Semitic" in Germany. He argued that it is absurd that Indonesians, Indonesian-Chinese, or people from Papua should be expected to interpret cruelty and hatred as an experience that must inevitably be linked to European anti-Semitism. Meanwhile, the renowned installation artist Titarubi speaks of a "monument of mourning" for artistic freedom internationally.<sup>2</sup> According to her, "monument of mourning" becomes a memorial monument to celebrate freedom of art that has ethical awareness in aesthetics. Freedom in art, no matter how small, is needed by people. When life is like that strict with all the rules and restrictions and tiresome burdens, art seems to offer a way of liberation, Titarubi added.

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<sup>1</sup> See *Documenta Takes Down Art after Antisemitism Accusations*. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/21/arts/design/documenta-antisemitism.html>

<sup>2</sup> See *Documenta 15: Monumen Duka di Friedrichsplatz*. Deutsche Welle. <https://www.dw.com/id/monumen-duka-di-documenta-15-friedrichsplatz/a-62863402>

As the most populous Muslim country in the world, Indonesia does not have diplomatic relations with Israel. Anti-Semitic sentiment can be traced back to colonial officials and European travelers in the 19th century who systematically applied European stereotypes of Jews to local Chinese populations throughout Southeast Asia. Compounded by the legacy of colonial rule that negates critical thinking education for many Indonesians, it is not surprising that in the end, the anti-Semitic sentiment was quite widespread.<sup>3</sup> There is a lot to ask in the artwork and it's surprising that this image in the "People's Justice" had not provoke a negative reaction from other audiences in the past. *Taring Padi* admitted that their approach may be "sloppy and careless". This experience, they said, will lead to a more cautious approach to the impact of imagery in the work. Unfortunately, Documenta didn't seem to be able to give its artists a platform to explain how careful explanation is. The accusation that the artwork reflects Goebbels-style Nazi sentiment is a hyperbolic and extremist, even reactionary, response; these accusations create a dangerous atmosphere in which the artist's safety was threatened. Institutional and government reactions have prevented constructive discussion in order to contextualize the politics of representation from multiple perspectives.

### **"The Distribution of Sensible" and "People's Justice"**

Another well-known concept from Rancière is *The Distribution of Sensible*. The distribution occurs when the police work as a means of order.

The police is thus first an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying, ... it is an order of the visible and the invisible. That sees that a particular activity is visible and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and another as noise. (Stoneman, 2011)

Rancière wanted to emphasize that what can be accepted is only what applies to the police and what does not fall within the police framework is disorder or noise. Police work for the distribution of sensible or the formation of a proper distribution to ensure that a set of perceptions of things outside of themselves can be rejected. The system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it (Rancière, 2004). Distribution of Sensible thus presents a shared reality that is very exclusive in nature. Exclusivity is where certain groups benefit and are allowed while others are not allowed even though ideally, democratic principles allow.

This logic of propriety settles as a social order, norm, or whatever is accepted as truth and public opinion. Consequences for challenging propriety can have various consequences because they are baiting themselves to be ready to be blamed, 'the wrong', instead of being seen as an effort to emancipate and verify themselves to participate in different areas appropriately. The consequence of single identity is inhumane behavior when the law deprives them of their rights with the stigma of 'the wrong'. The wrong-the singularity of the local argument and expression of law-is distinguished from the particularization of right attributed to collectivities according to their identity and is only possible as long as its universality is separate from the naked relationship between humanity and inhumanity (Norval, 2012). Minority groups are thus very likely to be 'the wrong' because they have disappeared from the discourse of the community's single identity so that their rights and

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<sup>3</sup> See *The State of Antisemitism in Asia-Pacific*. American Jewish Committee. <https://www.ajc.org/news/the-state-of-antisemitism-in-asia-pacific>

interests become legitimate, not to be taken into account or even castrated. These events may occur on a daily basis, for example when the prerequisite for a police officer is culturally not a citizen of a certain descent even though he holds a valid identity card or scholarship assistance is given to a certain culturally legitimized religious identity of the majority.

This dilemma occurs and seems culturally legitimate, but in fact, it is bad for public ethics when faced with the public rights of citizens who live in a democracy. In the case of *Taring Padi's* "People's Justice", "The Wrong" may be directed to the Jews if it uses the perspective of the artists who come from a Muslim-majority country with all the geo-political and geo-economic conditions that occurred in the past as the described in the previous section. But then, how does democracy ethically allow groups like *Taring Padi* to voice what's on their minds? The strict social hierarchy continues to be practiced culturally to oppress each other and reject the intelligence of small groups who seem to have no knowledge base to understand the world they experience. Rancière also stated, "le sans part – those who have no part, to the conflict between parts of society" (Schaap, 2011). This concept also gives a signal that there are parts that do not have a part, or "the portion of the portionless". So Rancière emphasized that the task of democracy is to oppose what seems to be given to groups and actually has the potential to censor certain groups within it. Democracy as a form for constructing dissensus over 'the given' of public life" (Rancière, 2004).

## Conclusion

The complexity of Rancière's thoughts explores further questions that the author has not been able to solve in just one short article. The conclusion that the author proposes at the end of this paper is intended as an encouragement for both the writer and the readers to conduct more intensive and extensive research on the meaning and interpretation of a work of art as a communication tool to open up space for dialogue so that what has happened in Documenta Fifteen could be a reflection, that art, after all, could be a tool to encompasses the principles of freedom of thought and expression, may be reflected in its ability to address even the most delicate issues.

A series of concepts Rancière's ideas of equality can be placed as an effort to distribute social justice. His point about the concept of dissensus to reject the consensus model that can give the public and minority interests the absence, of course, is not only applicable in political thought but also in arts. The dissensus, as Rancière proposed, suggests that democracy does not allow for a final consensus because power does not apply absolutely in a democracy, so the voices scattered in the power consensus must be reconfigured to produce a quality public life for every citizen, even in arts and culture. The democratic mind is thus an attempt to continue to listen and distribute justice that is imagined together so that nothing is scattered. This is possible because everyone, as well as artists, can articulate their experiences and thoughts of injustice so that they can be responded to in political hegemony.

Documenta Fifteen, with its horizontal strategy and open platform, however fragile, offers us the opportunity to engage in conversations about our wisdom, political interests, and privileged positions. These conversations are sometimes may uncomfortable, hurtful, and also offensive. This is where we need deliberative democracy: a staggering struggle, difficult if not impossible to reach a consensus. Documenta Fifteen has presented some of these experiments to its audience. This is an opportunity for a dialogue about the most important social, political, and human rights challenges of our time.

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