



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at the opening of documenta fifteen
on 18 June 2022
in Kassel**

Let me be quite frank when I say that I was unsure in recent weeks whether I would be here with you today.

And yet, since the first documenta, since 1955, it has been traditional for the Federal President to attend the opening day in Kassel. After all, documenta is not only the most important exhibition series of contemporary art. Every five years, it works its way into society, as it were, by focusing on the state of society itself. documenta has never been only national; international art has always been showcased at it. What is more, for the first time, a curators' collective from the Global South is responsible for this world art event – in so doing, documenta fifteen is also bringing the debate about the global present here to Kassel.

It is also fitting that I have just come from Indonesia, a country that has undergone genuinely profound political and social change in recent decades. A country that has fought for and won its own identity and independence after a long history of foreign rule and colonisation. It is the world's biggest Muslim-majority democracy.

However, it is also a country that is feeling the impacts of climate change, the impacts of environmental pollution and, yes, the impacts of the Western lifestyle first-hand today. In Indonesia, I saw how – and under which conditions – people live on seemingly endless rubbish dumps. I saw how plastic waste from a dump is being turned into bricks as part of an art project involving the local population. These bricks are being used to build a house for the inhabitants of the rubbish dump – as a place for art, and also as a place for a foundation from which the people can benefit financially.

Art is being created from rubbish. The future is emerging from rubbish. And yet it is still rubbish, first and foremost Western rubbish. I was ashamed to see this – and, at the same time, impressed.

And so I am all the more delighted that an Indonesian curators' collective has been chosen for documenta fifteen. I was able to take a first look at the exhibition just now, and I am sure that, on my tour in just a moment, I will see still more surprising, exciting and perhaps also disturbing or scandalous exhibits.

So why was I hesitant to come here today?

Seldom has a documenta given rise to such a vehement, such a critical debate as this one before it has even started – a debate that has been less about art and much more about political messages. And I admit that I have been taken aback by the abrasiveness of this dispute, by the irreconcilability of the tone adopted.

We all know that art is not something without controversy. A democratic society must not tell artists what to do, and must certainly not exploit them. Art does not have a political mandate. And politics does not pass judgement on the quality of art.

Art, on the other hand, can get a society into dialogue with itself – a dialogue that, incidentally, we, all of us together, badly need. A dialogue that seeks to achieve enlightenment that is not so much encouraged as suppressed in the culture of outrage of social media and in the face of the daily urge on the part of many users to speak their minds.

So art is never without controversy, but does this mean that everything is art? Joseph Beuys would answer this question with an emphatic "yes!". But this cannot mean that all those who draw on art for their political messages are beyond criticism, particularly not when they make political activism an art form. Those who enter the political forum as artists must not only come to grips with aesthetic questions, but also with the political debate and criticism. And there are limits here!

I am speaking to you here today to make this point clear.

I followed the discussion prior to this documenta very closely, about what we must expect from art, and also about the, at times, thoughtless and reckless approach to the State of Israel. As understandable as certain criticism of Israeli policy is, such as the construction of settlements, recognising Israeli statehood is about recognising the dignity and security of the modern Jewish community, about recognising the certainty of its existence. As Germany's Federal President, I wish to say on behalf of my country that recognising Israel is the basis and precondition of this debate.

I repeat: art can be offensive; it is intended to trigger debate. Not only that, the freedom of opinion and the freedom of art lie at the heart of our constitution. Criticism of Israeli policy is permissible. But a line is crossed when criticism of Israel gives way to questioning its existence.

It is striking that apparently no Jewish artists or artists from Israel are represented at this major exhibition of contemporary art. And I find it disturbing to see how, around the world, representatives from the Global South have, in recent times, refused to take part in conferences or festivals attended by Jewish Israelis.

Boycotting Israel is tantamount to denying its existence. When contact to independent minds from Israel is not allowed, when they are excluded from encounters and discourse with a cultural international community that otherwise prides itself on openness and freedom from prejudice, then this is more than mere ignorance. Where this occurs systematically, it is a strategy of marginalisation and stigmatisation that is indistinguishable from hatred of the Jews.

We must, in spite of everything, look at and also listen more attentively to the issues that concern people in the Global South. Its long colonial past with its reign of tyranny and exploitation and the numerous blind spots in coming to terms with it, its experience of suppression and disenfranchisement, as well as the issue of stolen cultural property. But also the already tangible, dramatic impact of climate change with extreme weather events, droughts, food scarcity and famine.

Coming to grips with the legitimate interests of the Global South requires a great deal: historical knowledge, political reason, sensitivity, seriousness, curiosity and mutual respect. In a word, it requires discourse.

I would have preferred all of this to have been discussed prior to the opening of this documenta. And I regret that it was not possible to hold a direct discussion between representatives of the Global South, the Jewish community in Germany and Israel – a discussion that would perhaps have shed light on the gaps in the postcolonial discourse here in this country. We are certainly not discussing the pressing questions of the present – and the past – at the extra-terrestrial level but in the real world, with its history of conflict, war and experiences of violence. With all the residues this has left in the perceptions of people and nations.

A global culture of remembrance is only just beginning to emerge. And it can only emerge in a convincing manner if it takes all cultures of remembrance into account – and this includes the Jewish and Israeli cultures of remembrance.

This especially applies to an exhibition venue in Germany. No one who wants to be taken seriously as a participant in a debate in Germany can speak about Israel but remain silent about six million murdered Jews. The wound that is the Shoah remains open; we want it to remain visible. The suffering that Germans inflicted on Jews, the lessons learned by the descendants of the perpetrators, the miracle of reconciliation between Germany and Israel – all these are experiences that we

Germans not only contribute to a global culture of remembrance, but which, I believe, we have a duty to contribute.

That is why I am also addressing the management and shareholders of documenta. It is part and parcel of the principle of this world art show that each exhibition is curated independently. I'm aware of this fact. And the enormous importance of documenta as the central forum of the global art community most certainly also has to do with the great artistic freedom enjoyed by each and every curator – or, as is the case this year, the curating collective. However, responsibility remains. Responsibility cannot be outsourced.

I would therefore very much welcome it if those responsible for documenta would seize this challenging mediating role with both hands – and also create suitable structures to this end. I'm quite sure that there won't be a lack of support. The Minister of State for Culture has also offered her assistance in this regard.

Far too many people make their lives very easy these days when it comes to complex issues. There is only black or white, only "for" or "against"; there is no differentiation, and no mutual effort to understand the other. Responding with boycotts instead of engaging in discussions. But does this new uncompromising stance help us at all?

The video and installation artist Leon Kahane offered what I consider an excellent response to this question in a guest article for the "Süddeutsche Zeitung". Kahane wrote the following: "There are contradictions between the arguments and conclusions that arise from coming to terms with colonialism and the Shoah. These contradictions cannot be broken down. They can only be tolerated, discussed and acknowledged."

And yet, Kahane goes on, there are limits: "Antisemitism and racism are such limits."

documenta is not only the most important, but also the best place for processes of discussing contemporary art. I want to strengthen this place. And I want to strengthen documenta. We need it – and more urgently than the current debate would have us believe! Over the decades, it has earned our trust to be the future home of a genuine international community of art – free from boycotts and free from prejudice. A place of open encounters with an awareness of an undivided humanity.