

DOCUMENTA 15 DIARY: AT THE FRIDERICIANUM AND DOCUMENTAHALLE



An installation by Dan Perjovschi on the facade of the Fridericianum at Documenta 15.
 PHOTO EMILY WATLINGTON

Nearly everything on view at the **Fridericianum** and documentaHalle—the two main venues hosting **Documenta 15**—seems indifferent toward being considered “art.” Ethics are first, then form follows—or is, maybe, an afterthought.

The prevalence of works that could be described as social sculpture, relational aesthetics, and archive fever—or simply performances originally staged for small audiences that are now displayed on CRT monitors—suggest that forms of political art from yesteryear are back, or maybe never left. But while the Euro-American figures famous for using these forms were bent on expanding the narrow, Western, modernist definition of what art can be, many of the participants—most of whom are collectives—are unburdened by this history, operating in different disciplines and disparate cultures. Their lineages and ambitions are not defined by the format of the white cube that dominates the quinquennial, and many of the works ostensibly on view here bleed well beyond Kassel, the German town that has hosted Documenta since its founding in 1955.

For instance, the work of The Black Archives is primarily archival—they see their installations of archival ephemera in display cases, organized topically, as efforts to preserve and display Black history. There’s a lot of archival material in videos and in vitrines—almost everything else I’ve seen so far looks something like a classroom or a protest sign. Cardboard and hand-painted letters abound, as does movable seating designed for informal gatherings.

Sometimes, I found myself missing the types of aesthetic art objects one usually expects in such an art show, and it was refreshing to see the occasional work actually meant for the white cube context of the Fridericianum. Works by Roma artist Selma Selman—paintings on repurposed car parts that recall her father's time reselling scrap metal—stand out in this regard. But there were certainly compelling collaborative efforts that served as reminders of how problematic and extractive singular artistic visions can be.

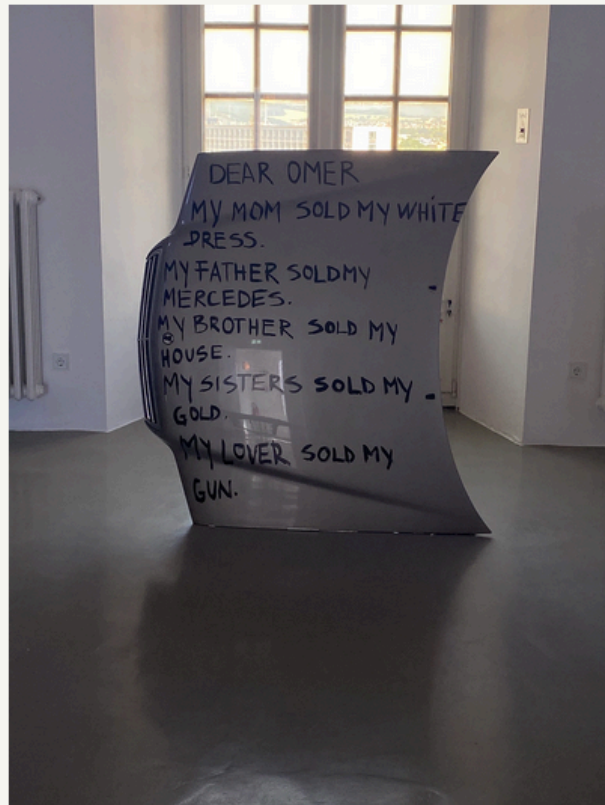
Centre d'art Waza, a group based in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, facilitates compelling collaboration among artists, miners, villagers, and ecologists. Instead of inviting artists to represent workers in a one-sided way, they encourage exchange. The Centre showed three projects, and my favorite was a video projected in a dome that tells the story of smelters in the Congolese copper belt. A poem suggests that at times, it feels like African workers themselves are the natural resource being extracted. But in video interviews with the workers, we see another spin on the narrative, one that shows how and why they create *croisettes*, or copper crosses, for themselves and as a way of taking ownership of some of their cultural and natural resources.

The 2022 edition, titled “lumbung,” is committed to resource sharing and, accordingly, provides various unprecedented forms of access for visitors. One of the first things you encounter while entering Fridericianum is a daycare, where parents can leave their children to make art and watch videos while they take in the massive show, which is curated by the Indonesian collective [ruangrupa](#).

Visitors can also opt to purchase an extra ticket that gets donated to someone else. And, it's the most major show yet to take accessibility for disabled visitors semi-seriously. This last effort was pretty imperfect. For instance, wall labels were hung at apparently random heights, sometimes too low for even wheelchair users, or requiring severe back strain or squatting for ambulatory folks. And the only large print version of the booklet is also the plain language version of the booklet—the contents are incredibly oversimplified in a gesture that oddly lumps the neurodivergent and visually impaired together. But still, it's a step forward that anyone is trying at all.

Given the preponderance of binder clips, posters, newsprint, and cardboard, one wonders how the whole thing managed to cost a controversial \$51 million. I suspect there are acts of redistribution that are not exactly on view. I'm curious to learn more and wonder how transparent that information will be. I do know that some artists, like the Tunis-based collective El Warcha, are living in the Fridericianum and staying for the show's entire 100 day run to continue hosting workshops, so perhaps the quinquennial is also providing basic housing and living wages for artists, many of whom live precarious lives and float from residency to residency.

As my friend Adam Kleinman, who was a curatorial agent on documenta 13, put it to me, ruangrupa seems to be using the art world as a stopgap measure for a failed welfare state.



Work by Selma Selman in documenta 15.
PHOTO EMILY WATLINGTON