

Head of Documenta Resigns Amid Antisemitism Scandal

A crisis at one of the world's most important art events, in Germany, has deepened with the resignation of its director general.



Visitors at the Museum Fridericianum in June during the Documenta contemporary art exhibition in Kassel, Germany.

By Alex Marshall

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After a month of crisis that has roiled the art world, Sabine Schormann, the director general of the renowned contemporary art exhibition Documenta, resigned on Saturday from her post only 28 days into the exhibition's 100-day run.

The crisis began after an artwork containing antisemitic imagery was installed, covered up and then removed from the exhibition, which is held every five years in Kassel, Germany. The hanging of the artwork, a huge piece that contained a Jewish caricature, has led to a loss of trust in the event, Documenta's board said in a statement announcing Ms. Schormann's departure.

The board "considers it essential that everything is done to regain that trust," the statement added. The board will convene a group of experts on art, antisemitism and

post-colonialism to determine what went wrong and decide if there are any further antisemitic images in the show, the statement said.

Documenta is widely considered one of the art world's most important events, rivaled only by the Venice Biennale.

This year's edition of Documenta, the 15th, is curated by ruangrupa, an Indonesian art collective, and it involves over 1,000 artists, mainly from the global south, hosting exhibitions and events. One group created a kink-friendly nightclub for visitors; another built a sauna. Many of the exhibition's venues are meant to be places where visitors can participate in events and discuss social and political issues, as much as look at art.

Siddhartha Mitter, reviewing Documenta for *The New York Times*, said that "everywhere in this show are possibilities thrown open: ways of examining the past, or exchanging in the present, that offer grounds for hope; strategies outside the strictures of state and capitalist systems; and fodder for civic imagination."

Despite such acclaim, Documenta was embroiled in controversy even before it opened. In January, a protest group called the Alliance Against Antisemitism Kassel accused ruangrupa and other artists of supporting the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement against Israel. In 2019, Germany's Parliament declared that movement antisemitic, saying it questioned Israel's right to exist.

The accusations appeared first on a blog, but they were picked up by German newspapers and politicians. In June, the furor went into overdrive when Taring Padi, another Indonesian art collective, installed an artwork called "People's Justice" in one of Kassel's main squares.

Some 60 feet long, "People's Justice," originally made in 2002, is a political banner that features cartoonlike depictions of activists struggling under Indonesia's military rule. Among the multitude of figures is one that appears to be a Jewish caricature with sidelocks and fangs, wearing a hat emblazoned with the Nazi "SS" emblem.

The banner also contains a military figure, with a pig's head, that is wearing a Star of David neckerchief and that has the word "Mossad," the name of Israel's security service, written on its helmet. (That figure appears alongside soldiers identified as members of other intelligence forces, including the K.G.B.)

Claudia Roth, Germany's culture minister, said in a statement at the time that "in my view, this is antisemitic imagery," and the banner was criticized by prominent Jewish groups and Israel's Embassy in Germany. The artwork was first covered up and then removed, and both Taring Padi and ruangrupa apologized, but that did not end the controversy.



Sabine Schormann in June at the museum in Kassel.

Days later, Ms. Roth said the festival needed to explain how the “clearly antisemitic picture” was hung in the first place, adding that Documenta needed “fundamental structural reform” if it were to receive future funding from Germany’s government.

That same day, Ms. Schormann tried to distance herself from the controversy by saying in a news release that she was “not responsible” for the artistic content of Documenta. The exhibition would be “inspected for further critical works,” the statement added. That task, it said, would be led by ruangrupa with the support of Meron Mendel, the director of the Anne Frank Education Center in Frankfurt.

Those moves did not bring an end to the crisis, either, especially after Mr. Mendel resigned from his role. Mr. Mendel said in a telephone interview this past week, before Ms. Schormann’s resignation, that Documenta’s management team stopped him from beginning his task.

“I didn’t even get sent half an artwork to see,” he said. He had to contact artists himself to talk about their work, as Documenta at first refused to put him in touch with them, he added.

At least one Documenta artist has publicly admitted a loss of trust in the event. On July 8, Hito Steyerl, one of the most prominent artists in the exhibition, pulled her work, saying in an email to Documenta that she had “no confidence” in the organization’s ability to deal with the row. Ms. Steyerl said in a telephone interview

before Ms. Schormann's resignation that the furor had stopped people from paying attention to the art.

"The art is not even secondary — no one talks about it right now," Ms. Steyerl said.

"So many people worked for so much time on this," she added, "and by not addressing the accusations of antisemitism — both warranted and unwarranted — in a decisive and transparent manner, Documenta has let this debate eclipse everything else."

Documenta said in its statement on Saturday that it would appoint an interim director general to replace Ms. Schormann, but it gave no timeline for that happening.