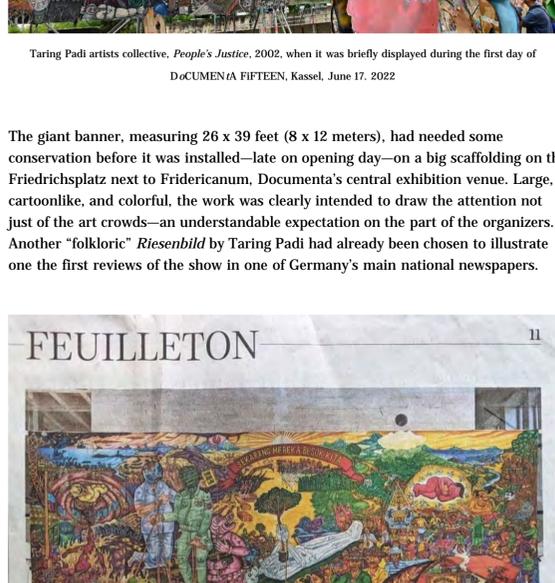


# C. G. BOERNER

DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

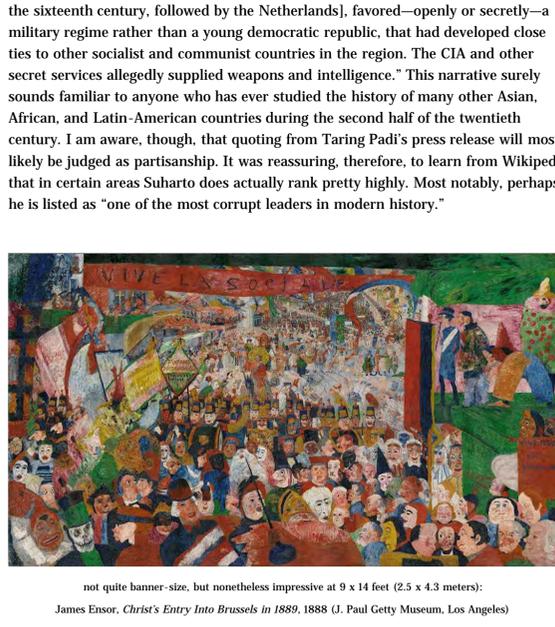
Distraction / Abwechslung  
27 July 2022

The critics had already filed the first round of reviews about the new “image-saturated and colorful” edition of DoCUMEN(A) FIFTEEN when Taring Padi, an Indonesian art collective, unrolled *People’s Justice*. The work was twenty years old, created in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, in 2002, in the wake of the bloody uprising of 1998 that had ultimately led to the fall of Suharto, Indonesia’s ruthless authoritarian ruler.



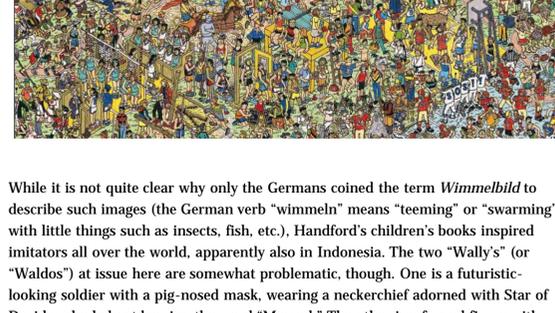
Taring Padi artists collective, *People’s Justice*, 2002, when it was briefly displayed during the first day of DoCUMEN(A) FIFTEEN, Kassel, June 17, 2022

The giant banner, measuring 26 x 39 feet (8 x 12 meters), had needed some conservation before it was installed—late on opening day—on a big scaffolding on the Friedrichsplatz next to Fridericianum, Documenta’s central exhibition venue. Large, cartoonlike, and colorful, the work was clearly intended to draw the attention not just of the art crowds—an understandable expectation on the part of the organizers. Another “folkloric” *Riesenbild* by Taring Padi had already been chosen to illustrate one of the first reviews of the show in one of Germany’s main national newspapers.



the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* on June 17, the day the scandal erupted

According to the group’s press release, the picture intends to depict life “under Suharto’s military dictatorship, where violence, exploitation and censorship were a daily reality.” The aim was to “expose the complex power relationships that are at play behind these injustices and the erasure of public memory surrounding the Indonesian genocide in 1965, where more than 500,000 people were murdered.” The Suharto regime enjoyed “vast support from all over the world. Various Western democracies, among them our former colonizer [the Dutch East India Company since the sixteenth century, followed by the Netherlands], favored—openly or secretly—a military regime rather than a young democratic republic, that had developed close ties to other socialist and communist countries in the region. The CIA and other secret services allegedly supplied weapons and intelligence.” This narrative surely sounds familiar to anyone who has ever studied the history of many other Asian, African, and Latin-American countries during the second half of the twentieth century. I am aware, though, that quoting from Taring Padi’s press release will most likely be judged as partisanship. It was reassuring, therefore, to learn from Wikipedia that in certain areas Suharto does actually rank pretty highly. Most notably, perhaps, he is listed as “one of the most corrupt leaders in modern history.”

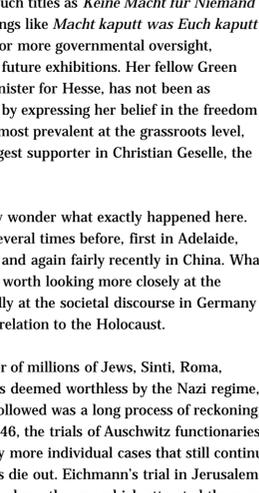
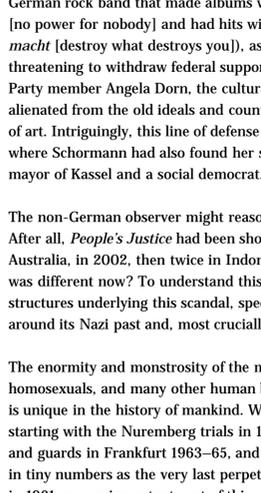


not quite banner-size, but nonetheless impressive at 9 x 14 feet (2.5 x 4.3 meters):  
James Ensor, *Christ’s Entry Into Brussels in 1889*, 1888 (J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles)

The banner had the form of a *Wimmelbild*: a scene crowded with myriad tiny details, a bit like a market scene by Pieter Bruegel or James Ensor’s magisterial *Christ’s Entry Into Brussels in 1889*. Ensor’s scathing critique of contemporary society still sat uncomfortably enough with the Belgians that, in 1987, exactly 99 years after it was painted, the government allowed it to leave the country for the Getty Museum in Los Angeles. Serendipitously, 1987 was also the year the English illustrator Martin Handford published his first *Where’s Wally* book (in the US the title was changed to *Where’s Waldo*).

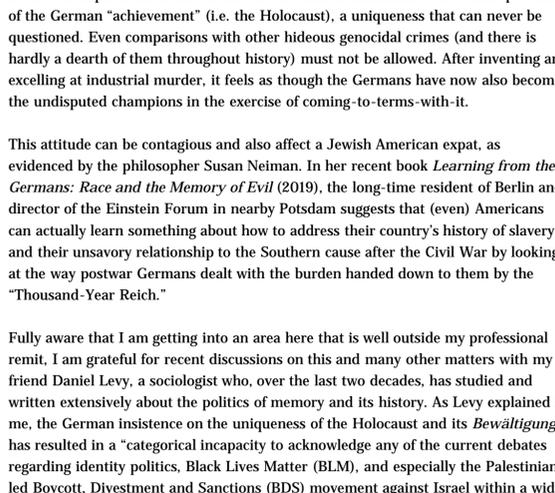


While it is not quite clear why only the Germans coined the term *Wimmelbild* to describe such images (the German verb “wimmeln” means “teeming” or “swarming” with little things such as insects, fish, etc.), Handford’s children’s books inspired imitators all over the world, apparently also in Indonesia. The two “Wally’s” (or “Waldos”) at issue here are somewhat problematic, though. One is a futuristic soldier with a pig-nose mask, wearing a neckerchief adorned with Star of David and a helmet bearing the word “Mossad.” The other is a fanged figure with bloodshot eyes and the sidelocks (payut) worn by orthodox Jews; as if this weren’t bad enough, his bowler hat inexplicably features the insignia of the “SS.”



on the left the Mossad agent marching beneath towering tank cannons and flanked by other, hardly more confidence-inspiring agents from the Australian Security Organization (ASIO) and the British Intelligence Agency MI5; on the right the vile and absurd depiction of a bowler-hatted Jew surrounded by a veritable freak show

Whereas the first seems to denounce the Israeli government’s clandestine involvement via its own secret service in support of the Suharto regime, the abstruse concoction of the second figure serves the same kind of vile anti-Semitic caricature that, in Germany especially, can only be seen as standing in the tradition of the infamous images peddled in such Nazi propaganda rags as *Der Stürmer* and *Der Völkische Beobachter*.

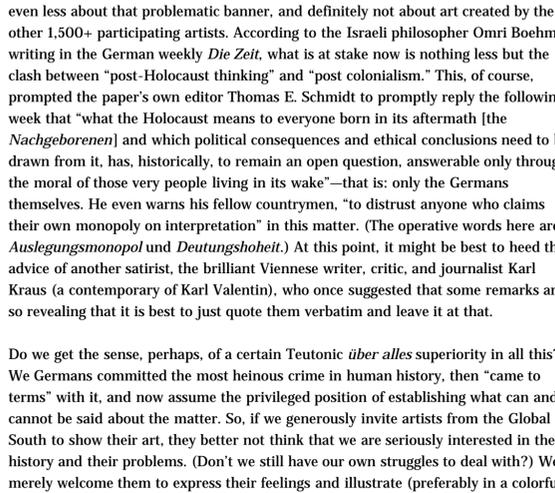


a futile effort in damage limitation

When the social media exposed these details, *People’s Justice* had all the attention, only not quite the kind the organizers had originally hoped for. The banner was immediately covered up, then deinstalled a few days later. Press releases were published and Taring Padi issued an apology, but the damage was done and the shitstorm never subsided. And since ruangrupa’s “lumbung framework” had dissolved questions of accountability into an ungraspable group dynamic, nobody wanted to be responsible. In the end, it was Sabine Schormann, DoCUMEN(A) FIFTEEN’s general director, who was forced to resign on July 16, a month after the event’s opening. Especially all the involved politicians now hope that Schormann’s resignation will enable everyone else to hold on to their posts. After all, this is a publicly funded mega-event desperately trying to avoid reputational damage (and spectacularly failing to do so). Schormann was, in effect, the scapegoat. (In German, this is referred to as a *Bauernopfer* [pawn sacrifice], a chess term that describes a player’s sacrifice of a pawn to gain an advantage later.) Claudia Roth, Germany’s minister for culture (who, in a former life, had managed Ton, Steine, Scherben [clay, stones, shards], a leftist German rock band that made albums with such titles as *Keine Macht für Niemand* [no power for nobody] and had hits with songs like *Macht kaputt was Euch kaputt macht* [destroy what destroys you]), asked for more governmental oversight, threatening to withdraw federal support for future exhibitions. Her fellow Green Party member Angela Dorn, the cultural minister for Hesse, has not been as alienated from the old ideals and countered by expressing her belief in the freedom of art. Intriguingly, this line of defense was most prevalent at the grassroots level, where Schormann had also found her strongest supporter in Christian Geselle, the mayor of Kassel and a social democrat.

The non-German observer might reasonably wonder what exactly happened here. After all, *People’s Justice* had been shown several times before, first in Adelaide, Australia, in 2002, then twice in Indonesia, and again fairly recently in China. What was different now? To understand this, it is worth looking more closely at the structures underlying this scandal, specifically at the societal discourse in Germany around its Nazi past and, most crucially, in relation to the Holocaust.

The enormity and monstrosity of the murder of millions of Jews, Sinti, Roma, homosexuals, and many other human beings deemed worthless by the Nazi regime, is unique in the history of mankind. What followed was a long process of reckoning, starting with the Nuremberg trials in 1945–46, the trials of Auschwitz functionaries and guards in Frankfurt 1963–65, and many more individual cases that still continue in tiny numbers as the very last perpetrators die out. Eichmann’s trial in Jerusalem in 1961 was an important part of this, and perhaps the one which attracted the most international attention. Germany’s *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, postwar society’s continuing effort to “come to terms with its Nazi past,” also resulted in a specific, and very dominant memorial culture.



Peter Eisenman, *The Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe*, 2003–04, Berlin Mitte

Of critical importance in this context is the national insistence on the incomparability of the German “achievement” (i.e. the Holocaust), a uniqueness that can never be questioned. Even comparisons with other hideous genocidal crimes (and there is hardly a dearth of them throughout history) must not be allowed. After inventing and excelling at industrial murder, it feels as though the Germans have now also become the undisputed champions in the exercise of coming-to-terms-with-it.

This attitude can be contagious and also affect a Jewish American expat, as evidenced by the philosopher Susan Neiman. In her recent book *Learning from the Germans: Race and the Memory of Evil* (2019), the long-time resident of Berlin and director of the Einstein Forum in nearby Potsdam suggests that (even) Americans can actually learn something about how to address their country’s history of slavery and their unsavory relationship to the Southern cause after the Civil War by looking at the way postwar Germans dealt with the burden handed down to them by the “Thousand-Year Reich.”

Fully aware that I am getting into an area here that is well outside my professional remit, I am grateful for recent discussions on this and many other matters with my friend Daniel Levy, a sociologist who, over the last two decades, has studied and written extensively about the politics of memory and its history. As Levy explained to me, the German insistence on the uniqueness of the Holocaust and its *Bewältigung* has resulted in a “categorical incapacity to acknowledge any of the current debates regarding identity politics, Black Lives Matter (BLM), and especially the Palestinian-led Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement against Israel within a wider thematic context.” He points out that the question of “race” plays a crucial and often overlooked role in this issue—a word, by the way, that in itself is practically unusable in a German conversation today. That is no less true of the word “Jude” (Jew). This once led a highly educated German friend of mine, upon first meeting my future wife, to inquire if she were “mosaic” (a literal translation of the German word “mosaisch,” referring to the people of Moses). “Why didn’t he just ask me if I am Jewish?,” she wondered afterwards, “rather than addressing me as if I am a Roman tile floor?”

According to Levy, “internationally, the discussion has long since moved on. Race is no longer seen as a biological concept but as the result of ‘racialization’ of groups or cultures, that is the way de-facto differences between groups or cultures are made into essential categories.” That this does not happen much in Germany, is a result of Nazi “race ideology,” which, in itself, was built upon prevalent European stereotypes regarding the “Jewish race.” Once, after their defeat, the Nazis’ venomous projection of the term “race” onto the Jews was exposed and rightfully abandoned, it appears as if the word itself was abolished in Germany. As Levy provocatively puts it: “the centrality of the Jews as a race led to the German abolishment of race as such.”

If issues of race entered German public discourse after the war, they only did so, according to Levy, in “an externalized way.” Racism became a “Nimby phenomenon” (=Not In My BackYard). It was something that could be criticized in the United States, in South Africa, and in the former colonies of Germany’s European neighbors, but not in Germany itself. (The Germans obtained their few colonies relatively late, which did not, of course, stop them from committing atrocities—the discussion of which was similarly belated.) At home, “racism mutated to *Fremdenfeindlichkeit* (xenophobia).” This brings us back to the German insistence on the singularity of the Holocaust which has made it strictly taboo to consider any aspect of anti-Semitism as a form of racism. Ultimately, says Levy, “this absolved the wider society from confronting any existing racism and relegating it to a problem of right-wing extremism and, at its most extreme, neo-Nazism” (both elements are, by the way, present in today’s AfD party [the abbreviation stands for “Alternative für Deutschland” or “alternative for Germany”] which is now represented in some regional parliaments and, worse, in the *Bundestag*—better not to think about what such an “alternative” could be). Levy gives the telling example of a protest music initiative that originated in Britain during the 1970s as *Rock against Racism*—in Germany, this immediately transmuted into *Rock gegen Rechts* (rock against the Right).



LP cover from 1979, designed by Jutta Dittfurth, one of the founding members of the German Green Party (Dittfurth left the party in 1991 in protest against its increasing orientation toward *Realpolitik*.)

The appearance of explicitly anti-Semitic motifs in a publicly displayed (and publicly funded) artwork at DoCUMEN(A) FIFTEEN has, once more, brought this unresolved (and perhaps even unresolvable) issue back into the art pages (the *Feuilleton*) of the German-speaking newspapers and their ubiquitous digital platforms. An increasing number of articles and opinion pieces continue to be published on the subject every day—despite the fact that the Bavarian caricaturist Karl Valentin had astutely observed already back in the 1920s that “everything has already been said, just not by everyone.” (I plead guilty as charged here.) And the longer the discussions drag on, the more abstract they become. Nobody is talking much about Documenta anymore, even less about that problematic banner, and definitely not about art created by the other 1,500+ participating artists. According to the Israeli philosopher Omri Boehm, writing in the German weekly *Die Zeit*, what is at stake now is nothing less but the clash between “post-Holocaust thinking” and “post colonialism.” This, of course, prompted the paper’s own editor Thomas E. Schmidt to promptly reply the following week that “what the Holocaust means to everyone born in its aftermath [the *Nachgeborenen*] and which political consequences and ethical conclusions need to be drawn from it, has, historically, to remain an open question, answerable only through the moral of those very people living in its wake”—that is: only the Germans themselves. He even warns his fellow countrymen, “to distrust anyone who claims their own monopoly on interpretation” in this matter. (The operative words here are *Auslegungsmonopol* und *Deutungshoheit*.) At this point, it might be best to heed the advice of another satirist, the brilliant Viennese writer, critic, and journalist Karl Kraus (a contemporary of Karl Valentin), who once suggested that some remarks are so revealing that it is best to just quote them verbatim and leave it at that.

Do we get the sense, perhaps, of a certain Teutonic *über alles* superiority in all this? We Germans committed the most heinous crime in human history, then “came to terms” with it, and now assume the privileged position of establishing what can and cannot be said about the matter. So, if we generously invite artists from the Global South to show their art, they better not think that we are seriously interested in their history and their problems. (Don’t we still have our own struggles to deal with?) We merely welcome them to express their feelings and illustrate (preferably in a colorful way) their struggle for liberation (from an oppression, after all, that usually originated in the “civilized West” that is now hosting them), but errors of judgment can on no account be tolerated (and let’s make no mistake: those anti-Semitic caricatures are more than merely minor missteps). In the end, then, it is still the presiding Germans who have the last word on what can be said and shown, and what is strictly *verboten*.



The physical result of the quick removal of Taring Padi’s *People’s Justice* is a large empty space in front of the Staatstheater between the Fridericianum and the Documenta Halle, already providing a new discussion about how to fill it. If one sees this open area today, however, it seems as if Nature herself, in her eternal wisdom, has already created the most perfect memorial of the event for which DoCUMEN(A) FIFTEEN will now always be remembered: after the heatwave and extreme drought that gripped Europe for weeks, all that is left at the very spot where the drama happened are the imprints from the scaffolding—and *verbrannte Erde* ...

