

An Interview with Madhusree Dutta

Questions and Transcript by Janna Lichter

Could you introduce yourself?

About myself, I am *Madhusree Dutta*. I am from *India* and I am the *artistic director* of *Akademie der Künste der Welt in Cologne* since 2018. Before, I used to work as a documentary filmmaker. I worked on documentation, memory, archiving, because it is part of *documentary practices*.

What are the challenges working at Akademie der Künste der Welt?

When I came here in 2018, there was some confusion what needs to be expected from *Akademie der Künste der Welt*. It is an institution of the world, right? It has some kind of international mandate, and it needs to present the international. At the same time, very simple thing, as the *international director*, I am speaking *English* because I don't know *Deutsch*, right? *English* is not my mother tongue but I am taught *English* as a *colonial subject*. I was taught when I was young if I speak *English*, I will belong to the world. But when I came here, speaking *English*, I became '*the other*'. That is the reality of every location. That means, what is mainstream, what is non-mainstream? What is little history, what is large history? All the things change as the location changes. The *colonial language* of *English*, I am giving you my personal experience in this, when I tried to use it, it didn't work here. I became '*the other*', the minority. As the *artistic director* of this institution, I realized one thing is to represent the international trait in cultural discourse, cultural politics, cultural practice, but another thing is to actually have a dialogue with the local realities. That's much more difficult. How do you create a dialogue with the local? With no context with the local, no international can work – or transnational, translocation, transcultural, multicultural, however you want to call it.

What is the idea of the latest project memory.station?

We thought of the project *memory.station*, where we first invited everybody to participate as a public art project. It was almost like an open call, we invited art initiatives all over *NRW* to come and join. The project was to initiate a dialogue about internationalism. Especially, in the urban area, because every urban area is international. There are layers of migration, but other than migration, it is production, because it is also shifting of capital and different cultural moods coming and going. It is a very complex area. So, I started this dialogue as understanding international in the local context. That is the *memory.station* project.

What are the collective practices of memory?

Let's get into those terms *personal*, *public*, *private*. When we first started talking about the project in 2018, I remember everybody came with distrust. The questions

were, whose copyright it will be? Who will own the data base? Who will get the credit? What about my privacy? I said, I don't know. I am driven by this political wheel to create a collective reversal of non-history or little history. And you come and we will work it out as we go along. Why should I trust you with my personal history? I said, no, trust yourself. The thing is that personal is not private. Personal is your grandmothers' memory, your daughters' memory, your own trouble childhood. All those are your personal memories but you can still make it public. That your experiences can be a learning point for me. And my experiences and your experiences are creating a much more complex history than we know. I contribute something, you contribute something. Experiences get connected to keywords and hotspots and become something else. It is like *hybrid*. You come in, I come in and a third thing comes out, because we interact. For that we have to go public!

What is a publican historian in the context of the project?

Memories need to travel. Memories should not be imprisoned in the attics and in the cellar. Enough they have been collecting dust in our chunks. Because the market has made everything, every data, every mail, every memory into a market, into a capital like google. So, what do we do? We kill this memories in order to not make this capital giants not make use of it? Or should we try to look for alternative platforms? I want to know your grandmother. If I want to do this job in *Cologne* of an artistic art institution it is very important to understand your grandmother. How do I do it? No history book will do it, no personal album will give me. Just because *google* can sell your grandmothers' memory to a capital, are we to erase her from history or should attend to create another way of platform? What I am trying to say, opposing the market, opposing privatization does not mean that we go completely *private*, alone and single. But we can go *public*. *Public and private* and are two different things. *privatization* and *publicization* are two different things. That was the call. The slogan is »Be a public historian«. Everybody is history because everybody belongs to a time.

I came across the terms found:erased:palimpsest?

The *Academies'* program in these three years, that I am here as an *artistic director*, is transporting four things. The first thing is, *sites*, it can be military sites, private sites, sites in contestation, all kind of *sites* such as location or space. Then the second is, *found:erased:palimpsest* which means to dig down. Third thing is, *hybrid*, when two different things come together and become once. And the fourth thing, is *fake*. *Fake* emerges, something taking over. This is the full concept. Now, *found:erased:palimpsest* is the most popular one because it has a public art and cultural element in it. It is very collaborative, very innovative. When I came, everybody said *palimpsest* is a word nobody will understand. They will understand found and erased but they will not understand *palimpsest*. I said, for that reason, it has to be there. If 200 German people learn a new word because of this project, I am happy. *Palimpsest* is not a very popular *English* word either, it is a Latin word. It is the grandfather of all European languages. *Palimpsest* more than belonging to a language it belongs to a cultural practice and that's why I am keen that this word comes in. *Palimpsest* is that what is buried under. I would say the whole *NRW* region

is *Palimpsest*. First of all, structurally, if you look at the coal mines. The mines are in layers buried under. This is the history of the region. That it goes down, down, down taking out minerals. And now, the region is going down because it is collapsing. That is *palimpsest*. Because of all the layers of industrialization, re-industrialization, ... So, it's culture is also *palimpsest*. To start structurally with this region is *palimpsest*. It is that when you found something, and it gets erased because people decide it should be deleted. It is not important, it goes out. But it doesn't go anywhere. It does not disappear, it stays somewhere. Where it stays is under, so we need to dig out.

Whose memories are collected?

It is like a treasure hunt. I have one letter, that my grandfather has written to my grandmother when he was working here, and she was alone in *Lebanon*. I have it. And you have a women's fashion magazine with an article about a popular lipstick that got printed in the same year from the city. So, my grandmother missing my grandfather for love reasons but also waiting for those lipstick to come. Because longing, migration is also recommodification, consumerism, desire and history. It should be all this, not only that my *Lebanese* grandmother is a colored, deserted woman whose husband is a migrant somewhere in *Germany*. She is not only that. And I will not allow anybody to reduce someone to be a sad woman in history. I don't know who will write this history but at least we can collect this history and glue it together. It is about how people lived in the worst of time guest-workers, non-guest-workers, unwanted workers, unwanted migrants, unwanted children, unwanted women, whoever, had a full living life. I want this attitude. When I started this project, everyone was about, oh, it is about minority memory. Oh, it is about little history, it is about forgotten history. I said who forgot? I didn't forget my history. You forgot. But why are you more important than me? Minority history. I am not minority. In my life, in my home, I am not minority, I am the main thing. In your context, you are the main thing. Why is your context more important than mine? The *German state* is obsessed with diversity. I always had to write down how my institution is committed to the cause of diversity. Of course, it is committed. But I have a problem here. That means that something is center which is *white, German* culture. And then it needs to go out to diversity! *Arabic culture, Turkish culture, Italian culture, Greek culture* that is going out. No! In *Cologne* in *Mühlheim* *Turkish* people are the main center, they are the main thing. They think the city center is the margin. Center and margin changes. *Memory.station* project is not collecting minority history. It is collecting people's stories that will build history because nobody is minority, nobody lives in margin. Everybody in their own context is in the center!

What is global and what is local?

There is a problem. You stop using the word *international* because the political class decides what is *international*. *Global* is also out because it is used for capital. We are in a crisis which language to use. But you know, *local* is very important and specific. If we don't understand the very specific, the very personal nature of your life, of your location, you will never understand what is *beyond*. These are actually by market by political power, these are made contested, they are made rival to each other. They

are not rival, when a child is born it knows only her mother but very soon two years and in 15 years it has 200 friends and with Facebook 1000 friends all over the world. That is the way it goes, it should be very natural, it should be a light. If you are not taught that anything that you don't know is bad, is fire. Don't touch the fire. You were taught by that. Anything that you don't know. Any skin-color that you don't know, any language that you don't know, any color of eyes that we don't know, any food that we don't know. We are taught to believe that it is fire, don't touch it, you get burned. There is a disbelief, a distrust that is the conflict in the local and the international. But it should be taken as a natural goal. Of course, there is politics, market, capitalism, all of this are not in your hands. But at least what you can do as an artistic director, I can at least try that people come in and break this distrust in them. I try to break this fear in people's head about the other. About things that you don't know and you are not familiar with.

What was the criticism remaining to the project memory.station?

The main *criticism* that still remains that's very interestingly cultural specific and cultural sensitive. I have been accused for having little respect for privacy and data rights. When I talk about public access that means whatever you upload everybody can see. I told it to everybody and I say it again. If you don't want me to see your family album don't upload it. If you think you trust me, you have to trust the whole world. I believe in public access. If you think what you upload is something you don't want to share, don't upload it. This project is for people who want to connect. People say, it is not as simple, there are copyright issues there are privacy issues. What if people make use of it? Any archiving project has this problem. Every time, you try to create a library or an archive, any time of collection, book or film. Be careful it should not go to the wrong hand. I am not up for this. I am an artist. It is not my job. That is the job of the state. The state will do it. My job is to include and not to exclude. I don't want to live with such negativity, I want to live with positivity, I want to live with trust. It doesn't go very well with the German temperament because it is too casual, too believing, too non-structure. But of course, I want to be non-structural. These are cultural conflicts, sometimes I enjoy them, sometimes I get annoyed. That is the distrust that stays with the project.

Hoch much is art intervening in political discourses and is art politics?

It is a very general question. And I don't know Janna if I am the right person to answer this. But for me art is more politics than politics itself is. Art is not politic in the sense, it does not go out and ask for a vote in the election but it is a *manifest*, it is proposal for politics. Art imagines a better world and in order to imagine the better world it also make an evolution of the present and the past world. That is very basic way that is arts' job. Every art project should be making a proposal for politics, creating a kind of *manifest* for a better world or for another world. What are the precaution that we need to take. That's a *manifest* for politics. It is not politics like going on the street, some people are also going on the street, of course, but, yes, art is politics.

Last question, what is utopian thinking for you?

I am last of the romantics but for me *utopia* is everything. It is imagination and a lack of *utopia* will be lack of *imagination*. You need to have access for *imagination*. That is *utopia*. And then as I told you it is the job of the state and politics, and of course market is also there, who will filter your *utopia* into a practical and balanced thing. But, *manifest* has to be *utopia*. A thing with *utopia* is, are we dismantling the center or not? Because what is the problem of *utopia* looking from it from a centered point. Every time, every day, and every action, are we challenging that centered position or not? And as I told you in the beginning. What is the center, it changes. For five decades of my life I used to think the center of the world is *English*. If I master *English*, I will belong to the center but then I come here and people say, you are in a margin because you speak only *English*. Center changes and we should be very alert about that!