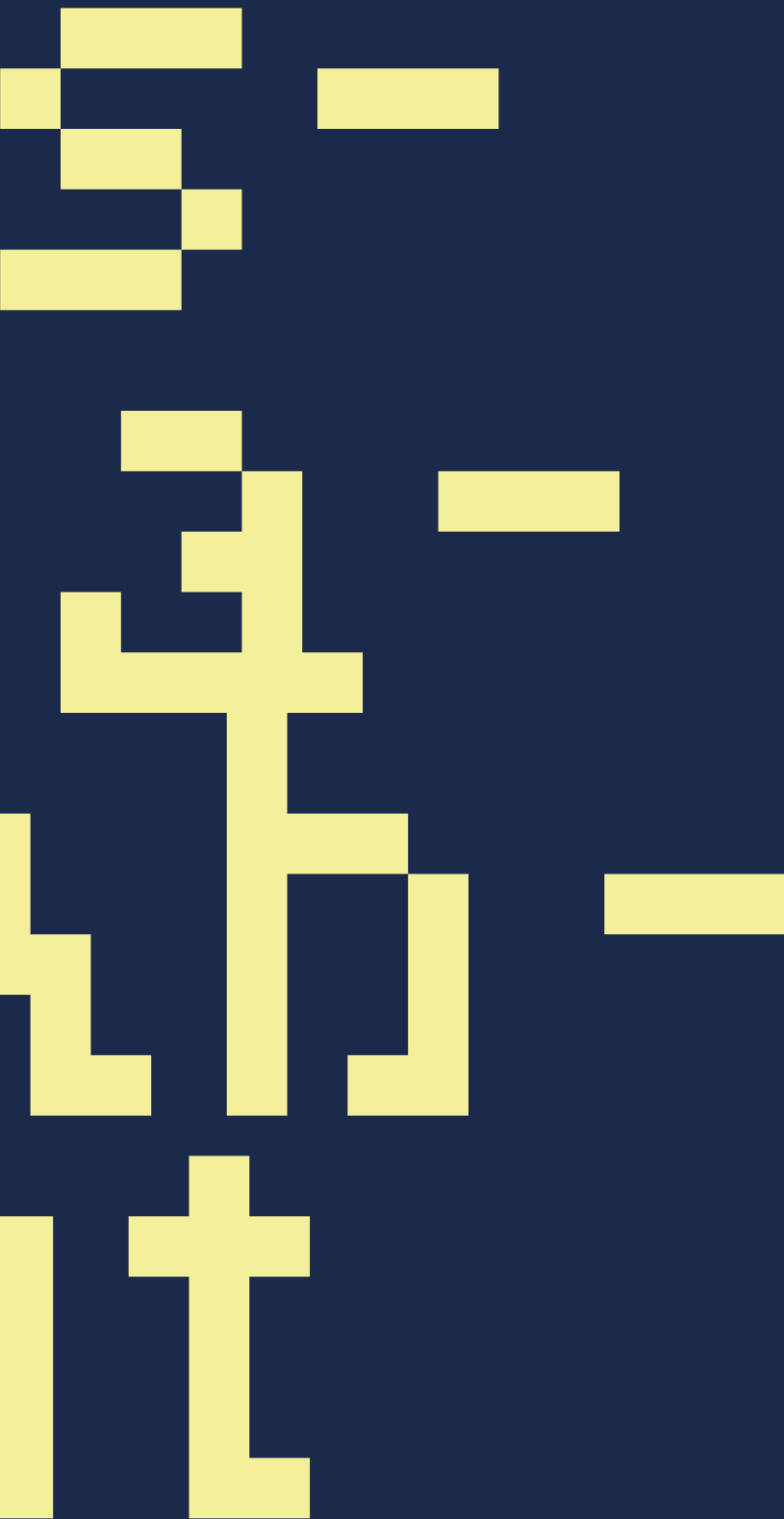




CURATORIAL REFLECTIONS:
MEMORY AS PROCESS
From Static Monuments to Living Practice

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The etymology of the word ‘remembrance’ takes us to its Latin roots: *memorare*, meaning ‘to be mindful of’, and *re*, indicating a return. Remembrance is not merely about recalling the past; it is about revisiting it with purpose, intention, with an active commitment to transformation. This understanding of remembrance forms the foundation of this contribution. To remember, in this sense, is not a passive act but an active one: it involves interrogating the past, grappling with its enduring legacies, and ensuring that historical consciousness informs both present and future actions.

In 2022, the German government made a decision to consider the creation of a place of remembrance and education dedicated to its colonial history. However, little to no progress has been made since then. Meanwhile, initiatives such as the *Memory in Motion* network have begun conceptualizing what such a place could and should look like. This text considers how curatorial and artistic practice can contribute to a more diverse and inclusive culture of memory as well as the lessons Germany might learn from other contexts, while clearly recognizing the distinct challenges posed by its own historical and political landscape.

Limitations of Traditional Archives and the Need for Alternative Spaces

The work of remembrance must extend beyond the construction of physical spaces or the accumulation of institutional archives. As global historian and professor Jie-Hyun Lim¹ points out, traditional archives require both financial resources and political power—both of which are unevenly distributed and often withheld from those most affected by colonial histories. In the absence of these resources, how do we create alternative, non-traditional archives given that memory is not static but layered, contested, and alive? It demands that we listen attentively to the silences, the erasures, and the acts of censorship that shape our narratives and ultimately history.

Listening is an active, artistic, and political act. To listen to silence is to attempt to interpret it, to ask: What is this silence telling us? Whose interests does it serve? What truths does it obscure? These questions are particularly urgent in a context where the legacies of colonialism intersect with contemporary issues of systemic racism, and the rise of

1 See Jie-Hyun Lim’s text in this publication on pp. 54–66.

anti-democratic movements. Addressing these intersections is not simply about reckoning with the past; it is about confronting the structures of violence that persist in the present. Germany's complicity in global injustices today mirrors historical patterns of exploitation. Though the specific contexts may differ, the underlying mechanisms of systemic harm remain disturbingly consistent.

The notion of memory as a zero-sum game, wherein one history is elevated at the expense of another, presents a significant barrier to inclusive remembrance practices. As Michael Rothberg and others argue, the concept of *multidirectional memory* offers an alternative framework that recognizes the interconnectedness of history and especially historical injustices.² This approach calls for dynamic spaces of remembrance capable of addressing colonial histories while simultaneously responding to contemporary socio-political realities.

Importantly, such spaces must not be confined to urban centres or elite cultural institutions. Peripheral and rural areas are often overlooked in national memory projects. They too carry the weight of historical violence, and must be included in efforts made toward inclusive remembrance. However, the challenge extends beyond geographic representation. Meaningful engagement with these histories requires a re-evaluation of the structures that define and disseminate memory.

Institutions that claim to support art and memory must be held accountable for their role in perpetuating exclusionary structures that do not include those who have been or continue to be affected by colonial continuities. Rather than replicating existing institutions with different faces, there is a need to envision new forms of organizing, sharing, and remembering, forms that resist commodification. This shift necessitates a commitment to people- and community-centred approaches that privilege lived experiences over bureaucratic efficiency.

2 Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).

Challenges of a Dedicated Space

The idea of a space dedicated to colonial memory sounds like a long overdue endeavour and yet it raises crucial questions: What purpose does it serve? Whose voices does it centre? What risks does it entail?

While such a space has the potential to acknowledge silenced histories and encourage reflection, creating a space of (un-) learning also risks becoming an endpoint rather than a starting point. A static monument that invokes guilt rather than a catalyst for systemic change. Memory confined to a single space risks freezing narratives and disconnecting them from the ongoing realities of structural inequalities rooted in colonial legacies. Without integrating colonial history into Germany's broader education system and linking it to tangible actions, such a place might remain a symbolic gesture rather than a transformative force.

This concern is heightened by the reality of the precarity of institutional support. A reminder of this vulnerability came with the recent announcement that the Dekoloniale space in Berlin must close; a decision that underscores the extent to which spaces dedicated to colonial memory mostly exist at the mercy of state funding and therefore shifting political priorities. Drawing on public tax money, such funding is not a gift but a responsibility. Yet, decisions about its allocation frequently prioritize short-term trends rather than sustained commitments to justice and accountability.

The Role of Art (and) Education

Art and education are central to this reimagining process. Alternative pedagogical models that draw on oral traditions, craft knowledge, and community-based learning have the potential to challenge dominant epistemologies and to position the act of critical questioning as an essential tool for remembrance.

In my work *The Herders and The Weavers Were The First To Know*, herders and weavers along with their distinctive crafts are recognized as holders of educational knowledge. Their crafts are deeply tied to their environments and are among the first to be impacted by economic and climate changes, raising urgent questions about economic shifts and their effects on cultural landscapes and heritage crafts. As their surroundings change, so too does the viability of their craft, making herders and weavers some of the earliest and most profoundly affected but also one of the first informed by and about these transformations.

By centering these forms of knowledge, the work challenges conventional hierarchies of learning and highlights the interdependence of culture, ecology, and economic structures. It presents a long-standing alternative knowledge system to the Western canon; one that is deeply rooted in place, tradition, and intergenerational transmission. This is not unique to a single region (here: Burkina Faso and Egypt) but exemplary of how every place holds its own knowledge traditions, offering valuable insights into sustainability, adaptation, and resilience. There is much to be learned from these practices, not in terms of technique but also in how they shape ways of knowing, remembering, and relating to the world.

Directly intersecting with artistic practice and thought, this highlights the vital role art itself has to play in the process of decolonizing memory. However, art cannot be separated from the material conditions of its production, nor can it be depoliticized to fit within capitalist frameworks of cultural consumption. To acknowledge that art is also a financial institution is to recognize the structural inequalities that shape its creation, distribution, and accessibility. When we speak of art's transformative capacity, it requires art to be engaged with class consciousness and with a deep commitment to issues of education, access, inclusion, and participation. Without this critical engagement, we risk perpetuating an aestheticized version of history that obscures the realities of systemic oppression.

The work of remembrance necessitates an ongoing interrogation of how spaces, both physical and conceptual, mediate memory and power. My curatorial and artistic practices operate within this critical space, questioning not only *what* is remembered but *how* and *by whom*. In this regard, they align with international examples such as Sonia Lawson's work at the Palais

de Lomé, where contemporary artistic interventions engage with Togo's colonial past, and Ibrahim Mahama's Savannah Center for Contemporary Art (SCCA) in Ghana, which reconfigures historical narratives through innovative approaches to space, collective memory, and artistic production. Such spaces remind us that memory work cannot exist in isolation from the communities it seeks to serve. Instead, it must be embedded in a process of

(re)imagining—one that remains critically attuned to both history and present structures of power. These forms of learning emphasize memory as a living, embodied practice rather than a static record. They remind us that education is not only about accumulating knowledge but about building connections, encouraging critical engagement, and challenging dominant narratives.

Finally, it is essential to interrogate the implications of democratizing memory. Genuine democracy and by extension, meaningful remembrance, requires that participation be both voluntary and revocable. The other day, I came across an Instagram post saying that 'everyone in the United States is in a non-consensual contract with genocide' and I believe this assertion applies equally to Germany, where historical and contemporary injustices remain structurally embedded and we are all a part of it. But what does it mean to withdraw consent from such a system? Is resistance—*becoming ungovernable*—not itself a democratic act? Democracy, in its truest form, disrupts hierarchies, centers multiplicity, and equalizes dissent and agreement.

Towards a Transformative Culture of Memory

Germany currently has seventeen physical spaces dedicated to the remembrance of its National Socialist past and the Holocaust in the Berlin-Brandenburg region alone. While these spaces have contributed to a national memory culture, they also highlight an imbalance: the lack of institutionalized remembrance for colonial violence. A comprehensive approach to memory work must recognize the continuities between different forms of state violence, rather than treating them as separate and unrelated histories.

For years, discussions in Germany have referred to the concept of *Rechtsruck*, a so-called sudden shift to the right in political discourse. Yet the term ‘Ruck’ suggests a sudden movement, whereas the reality is one of continuity rather than rupture. This mischaracterization allows the illusion of progress to persist, even as structural inequalities remain intact. In this context, the urgent question is: What has been missing in our approaches to memory work that has allowed such regressions to take hold?

The persistent rise in right-wing extremist crimes in Germany underscores the limitations of existing remembrance institutions in curbing such ideologies. Despite the presence of numerous Holocaust memorials and educational programmes, these measures alone have not prevented the resurgence of extremist activities. In 2024, German authorities recorded 33,963 politically motivated right-wing crimes (until November 2024) marking a significant increase from previous years.³ This alarming trend raises critical questions about the effectiveness of current approaches to remembrance. Are these institutions merely symbolic, serving as boxes to tick, or do they actively engage society in a collective process of reflection and action? The term *Rechtsruck* fails to capture the continuity of these

3 ‘Rechtsextremismus’, *Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz*, www.verfassungsschutz.de/DE/themen/rechtsextremismus/rechtsextremismus_node.html.

extremist undercurrents: the issue is not a sudden shift but an ongoing challenge.

If we establish a dedicated space for colonial history and its enduring impacts, we must critically assess its potential for real change. Will it serve as another checkbox on a national to-do list, or will it foster genuine understanding and transformation? The increasing number of right-wing crimes indicates that mere physical spaces are inadequate for combating deep-seated ideologies.

Therefore, we must envision places of remembrance that are accessible, inclusive, and community-centred. These spaces should welcome diverse audiences, providing safe environments for grief, discussion, and collective learning. Importantly, they should operate independently of state funding to ensure sustainability and freedom from imposed state influence. Such an approach demands a collective responsibility to reflect on our history and strive for a more equitable future.

In conclusion, the rise in right-wing extremism and ideologies despite extensive remembrance infrastructure highlights the need for a more

dynamic and participatory approach to memory culture and places of remembrance. Remembrance must evolve from static monuments to active, inclusive processes that engage all facets of society in confronting and learning from past injustices.

Justice is not an endpoint; it is a process. So, too, is remembrance. It requires a willingness to navigate discomfort, to engage in difficult conversations, and to be accountable to those whose histories have long been marginalized. The goal must not be to reproduce existing structures with different faces but to imagine new ones that reflect the multiplicity of lived experiences.

James Baldwin said something along the lines of ‘The purpose of art is to lay bare the questions which have been hidden by the answers.’ The practice of asking, the art of questioning is one I rigorously practise and invite everyone to participate in. Memory work requires us to ask difficult questions, not as a rhetorical exercise but as a means of forging new paths forward. Our task is to critically examine what we need in spaces of remembrance and how we can build structures that do not merely replicate those that have failed us. Remembrance, if it is to be meaningful, must be an active, ongoing, and honest practice.