



EMERGENCE

IRIS RAJANAYAGAM IN
CONVERSATION WITH
SUY LAN HOPMANN

Suy Lan Hopmann, a co-initiator of *Memory in Motion*, speaks with Iris Rajanayagam, a member of the curatorial team, about the project's development from 2021 to 2025.

IRIS RAJANAYAGAM: To start, I want to ask what you associate with the title *Memory in Motion*. What does it constitute for you? Or what, ideally, should it convey?

SUY LAN HOPMANN: *Memory in Motion* contains two central terms: remembrance and movement. For me, memory—in all its facets—means the work of remembrance, remembrance culture, individual and collective remembrance. It's never completed, but a process that needs to be continually renegotiated.

And then there is motion. For me, motion means starting out—the initial energy generated when something gets into gear, when people come together in order to change something. At the same time, motion stands for the steady, the slow, that which keeps flowing. It is not just about starting something but also about extending it, keeping it alive, carrying it forward. For me, that is the core of *Memory in Motion*. Grasping memory as something that remains in motion—something that is moved and sets others in motion. Remembrance is not something that happens on its own. It needs people who carry it, develop it further, and repeatedly bring it into the present.

IRIS: In 2021, you were one of the co-initiators of *Memory in Motion*. What were your initial thoughts during the project's conception phase? How did the idea for it come about?

SUY LAN: A lot happened during that time. The actual starting point for *Memory in Motion* was the decision by the newly elected federal government to finally create a site of learning and remembrance on the theme of colonialism. This marked the first time that decades of civil-society and scholarly work in this field was recognized as part of German history—and that one had to assume political responsibility in order to continue this work. I joined the Department for Culture and the Media in October 2021 in the first position—certainly at the state level and probably even nationwide—within a government agency explicitly dedicated to colonial history. The post was temporary, and Bundestag elections were taking place that

autumn. When I began the job, it was unclear whether there would even be this new federal government, let alone the decision to establish a site of learning and remembrance. It was only later that this undertaking was included in the coalition agreement.

I quickly realized that hardly anyone with the relevant expertise was working at the Department for Culture and the Media. This was partly because my post was the only one of its kind. And so I asked myself: Who should actually promote this topic within government agencies in Germany? At the same time, I was aware that my post was temporary—like so many things in politics. I hadn't planned to remain in public administration in the long term; instead, I wanted to use this particular situation to set something in motion.

From my previous work—both at MARKK (Museum am Rothenbaum – Kulturen und Künste der Welt) and in activist and civil-society contexts—I knew that many people in Germany had been working on colonial history and remembrance culture for years and even decades. The expertise was there—it just had to be brought together. So I posed the question of how these people could be connected and how they might collectively generate recommendations or proposals that really emerge from praxis and experience—not from the outside.

Before officially starting at the agency, I attended the second 'Decolonial Festival', where I had initial conversations with Nadja Ofuatey-Alazard and Christian Kopp about how Hamburg and Berlin could strengthen their cooperation. That was the pre-pre-history, so to speak. Shortly afterwards, I spoke with Eric Otieno Sumba, whom I immediately saw as the ideal person to develop an initial concept and build a network.

However, it took a long time for funds to be approved and political decisions to be made. From the outset, it was clear to us that an initiative like this had to be supported at numerous levels—by both the federal and state governments. During this phase, I spoke with many different people, including Nicola Lauré al-Samarai, who eventually connected with you and Peggy Piesche at the Federal Agency for Civic Education. At the same time, new departments and posts were being created in many places—many of

which have since been restructured or dismantled. Finally, there were the conversations between you and me, and then Ibou Diop from Dekoloniale Memory Culture in the City was brought in. That's how our team of four came together: you, Ibou Diop, Eric Otieno Sumba, and me.

IRIS: Since then, *Memory in Motion I* was held in Hamburg in January 2023, followed by *Memory in Motion II* in Berlin in December 2024. One initial outcome of these two events is this publication. Although you were not involved in organizing *Memory in Motion II*, you participated as an invited guest and contributed to shaping its content. How would you describe the development from *Memory in Motion I* to *Memory in Motion II*? And in your view, how can this work be continued?

SUY LAN: *Memory in Motion* was initially conceived for a more closed circle of people from which working groups would later emerge. Over time, however, the project has opened up considerably—which I see as a major gain. Today, many more people are involved, the range of perspectives has broadened, and the initiative as a whole has a broader base. There is currently a strong focus on Hamburg and Berlin, which was not the initial intention, as we initially wanted to work on a national level. However, the expansion in terms of both content and participants marks an important step forward.

What I find especially pleasing is that, in the second event, protagonists from local civil society played a much stronger role. People were not just invited to participate but really shaped the process. During the first run, there were still many representatives from public administrative offices, partly because the project was closely tied to the Department of Culture at the time, and my own position there served as a kind of hub. I see this shift towards local civil society as a very positive development. From the beginning, my aim was to loosen these processes from the political level in order to give them greater autonomy.

At the same time, I still consider it important to remain in dialogue with the public authorities—for example, when it comes to structural issues or questions of funding. However, what is decisive is that the momentum, the direction in terms of content, and the design come from civil society. For the second meeting, I would've liked to have seen a stronger presence of representatives from politics and administration in a listening role even if they weren't actively involved or officially invited, but motivated

by a genuine interest in what was happening here. For me, such forms of listening—being present without actively participating—are an expression of a shifting landscape of remembrance culture, one in which the focus is not only on talking but also on perceiving and supporting.

IRIS: The question of broader social change in relation to cultures of remembrance is one of the issues we addressed in our preliminary conversation. *Memory in Motion* took place at a time when a number of shifts in remembrance politics and culture could be observed, both in Germany and internationally. Parallel to, or intertwined with, these developments, right-wing or right-wing extremist tendencies were increasing in Germany and beyond. In this context, then as now, post- and decolonial approaches and research—particularly but not just from right-wing voices—have increasingly come under public scrutiny. They continue to be harshly criticized and even attacked. I want to go into this in more detail later.

First, however, let's move beyond the sociopolitical. Both *Memory in Motion I* and *Memory in Motion II* faced additional challenges, which can be traced back to conceptional considerations, and to some extent, to gaps within them. Many of the questions that emerged during *Memory in Motion I* were raised by international guests. Primarily, there was a lack of clarity and a confusion regarding their role in the process, as well as questions about where the initiative should lead in concrete terms. What challenges do you see, especially in regard to transferring between sometimes highly localized concerns and broader global or transnational discourses? In your view, what are the pitfalls, and what preconditions are necessary for success in this context?

SUY LAN: You mean the relationship between the local and the global?

IRIS: Correct. For us, the transnational perspective was decisive, as it was frequently not taken into account in the development of, and exchange on, cultures of remembrance in Germany. To counteract this, we very consciously included voices from formerly colonized regions. It was precisely this that was criticized by local civil society: 'Our voices are continually being ignored, and now expensive international guests are being invited.' In addition, there were local discourses, disputes, and conflicts; in my opinion, bringing this all together was no easy task.

SUY LAN: The first session was clearly conceived as a working meeting. The format consisted of small, closed spaces, short inputs, and ample room for exchange, with the idea that working groups would emerge and continue the work afterwards. In contrast, *Memory in Motion II* clearly had much more the character of an open event—one attended, listened to different contributions and workshops, and could participate without having to become actively involved.

For me, there are two answers to the question of how things should proceed. The first concerns something very specific to Hamburg, though it can also be applied to other cities. Local civil society actors who have been working for years with very different emphases and perspectives were long overlooked, which has led to a certain mistrust of official institutions and political bodies. So, when funding suddenly becomes available and international guests are invited, the question quickly becomes: ‘Why aren’t we a part of this? Why weren’t we included?’ This dynamic was especially apparent in Hamburg, but I believe it is a fundamental problem in many cities. In my opinion, the criticism of the closed character of the first meeting was less about its content and more about these structural experiences.

As before, the question for me regarding the site of learning and remembrance is the relationship between local struggles and transnational exchange. When we say that a site of learning and remembrance for colonialism should be established—whether in Hamburg, Berlin, or elsewhere—then it makes sense to begin with local conditions and with specific histories anchored in these places. Maybe this stems from my many years of work in the museum sector, but I am convinced that places themselves carry meaning. Even when history can no longer be directly read in the architecture, a trace of it remains in the space. Being in a specific place, knowing what happened there, and learning something about the history on site is different from just engaging with it digitally or abstractly.

At the same time, such places are never isolated. They are connected, they are in motion, and they appear in the histories of people who have moved away from the place or arrived there. These interconnections can be told from a concrete point—one has to start somewhere for a story to unfold. For me, this is precisely where the connection between the local and the transnational lies, as well as the necessity of keeping this exchange alive.

IRIS: The fact that invitations are extended to international guests to speak about themes such as colonialism, decolonialism, racism, and critiques of racism—while local protagonists who have perhaps worked for thirty years or more on these issues with limited resources are overlooked or neglected—is a phenomenon I have frequently observed in Germany. I think a decisive factor here is the process of externalization, which creates a certain distance and thus makes such voices less ‘dangerous’ or ‘threatening’ to hegemonic discourses and narratives. In turn, local voices are easier to contain. Established and prominent international guests are invited—which is naturally very important—but at the same time no attention is paid to ‘one’s own doorstep’, so to speak.

The transnational perspective can provide a helpful external momentum when local discourses begin to circle or repeat themselves. It is helpful to see that the discourse has moved forward or is simply different in other places, depending on the context. At the same time, it is naturally important to establish a connection to the specific local discourse so that such impulses can contribute to reflections and further developments in this context.

SUY LAN: Now I would like to ask you a question. In 2023, after *Memory in Motion I*, I left the cultural department and withdrew from the project. So, I would be interested to hear how you perceived the subsequent development of *Memory in Motion*.

The project’s beginnings coincided with a phase in remembrance politics in which many things were moving at once. On the one hand, we can look back at significant gains, which were largely achieved by civil society and subsequently taken up by politics: new positions, long-term projects on colonial

reappraisal, and the decision of the federal government to establish a site of learning and remembrance for colonialism.

At the same time, one could see a clear shift in the public discourse that increasingly questioned decolonial and post-colonial approaches. When Otieno and I discussed the conception for *Memory in Motion* in 2022, we were concerned that the theme could be attacked or politically instrumentalized. The Achille Mbembe debate from 2020 was still recent, the documenta fifteen controversy about anti-Semitism in the cultural field erupted during the preparations for *Memory in Motion I*, and post-colonial studies were at the centre of polarized public discussions.

Against this background, I would be interested to know: How did you see these developments, and how did they influence the subsequent conceptual considerations for *Memory in Motion II*?

IRIS: In my opinion, the increased delegitimization of decolonial and post-colonial approaches has been apparent in the local context for several years. Now, however, especially since 7 October 2023, it has significantly intensified, and so has its reverberations. Sebastian Conrad has provided a vivid description and analysis of this development in his recent article ‘Postkoloniale Theorie und Antisemitismus’. In the curatorial text of this book, we also discuss how, in the context of these attacks on the field, racist narratives are perpetuated, anti-migration discourses are promoted, and, relatedly, critical voices from academia and civil society—currently, and with greater frequency, those expressing solidarity with Palestine or speaking out against Israel’s military operations, which numerous scholars and human-rights organizations classify as a genocide—are discredited, silenced, or in some cases even criminalized.

In the 2000s, awareness of the necessity to increasingly engage with and reappraise German colonialism and its ongoing impact began to grow within politics and society—reappraisal not in the sense of overcoming and forgetting, but an actual reappraisal with a view towards possible compensatory justice. Major momentum was provided by the Black Lives Matter movement, which opened doors, spaces, and possibilities, and above all, made resources available. Something changed within Germany’s remembrance-politics landscape as a result. Today, the reality is different.

Despite the developments outlined above, my impression is that the idea for *Memory in Motion* was developed at the tail end of a period in 2021 in which a discourse was still barely possible. There was, however, a potential (though diminishing) openness for the theme in all its facets—for example, in relation to plural cultures of remembrance,

entangled historical approaches, and relational remembrance—concepts and approaches that were central for *Memory in Motion I*. A space had opened up for an entangled historical approach in which questions could be considered and discussed, such as ‘What is remembered and what not? How are histories of violence and injustice interconnected? What are the specificities and points of intersection?’ This was reflected in the range of guests we invited and the themes we selected.

What role did the ideas of relational remembrance and entangled, global-historical approaches play for you in the conception of *Memory in Motion*, particularly in relation to questions of cross-community solidarities?

SUY LAN: From the beginning, entangled historical and intersectional approaches have been at the centre of our work. They form the core of our understanding of history and shaped the processes we implemented in *Memory in Motion*. It is precisely against this background that, regretfully, we must acknowledge the absence of explicitly queer-feminist perspectives in *Memory in Motion I* and *II*. Since then, they have been discussed, and during the concluding session of *Memory in Motion II* they were explicitly addressed, although overall they were not sufficiently integrated.

IRIS: There was a lot of discussion about whether the site should be decentralized or partially digital. There was also extensive discussion about its target audience. But what particularly interests me is how such a site of learning and remembrance can also become a cross-community space—in other words, a space where cross-community structures can develop and be strengthened. Isidora Randjelović has written about memorial sites as living spaces where exchange takes place and which visitors can interact with. How do you imagine a site of learning and remembrance for colonialism that enables and reinforces cross-community solidarities or solidarity structures?

SUY LAN: I believe that the global-historical, entangled, and intersectional approaches I mentioned earlier are fundamental—not just for how we understand history but also for how we treat one another as a community. They create the conditions that make cross-community solidarity possible in the first place, because they establish a common ground from

which we can approach one another. Even in areas where we share few common experiences, there are points of contact that facilitate mutual understanding. This requires a mindset that places intersectionality at the centre and recognizes the interrelations.

A similar thing applies to the site itself. I still believe the original programme posed central questions that can be built on. One of these questions concerned the function of the site. We had already defined several functions back then, and in fact many of them are also reflected in *Memory in Motion*. Learning is part of the concept—and learning means encounter. At the same time, it is about remembrance, research, and making different experiences tangible at a specific place. Thus, a common basis is established in order to enter into dialogue.

That is why it is so important to start with the site itself, and from there to think through the interconnections, both thematically and spatially. It would also be exciting to strengthen communication with people from museums and memorials, as well as with protagonists involved in monument conservation or urban planning who design and operate such sites. The architecture, the art, the aesthetics of a site, the people, the offerings, the access to histories, books, films, or archives—all of this shapes how a site is experienced. From my perspective, how this is all realized in a space remains central, and it is worthwhile to continue to explore this.

IRIS: I find the question of the archive very exciting, especially with regard to so-called transformative archives—in other words, archives that disrupt conventional forms of documentation and presentation of history, and thus the manufacture of history. Maybe this site of remembrance could, amongst other things, serve as

a place where marginalized knowledge is archived and transformative archives established.

In conclusion, I would like to pose the obvious question: At this moment in time, considering the current political and social situation, how do you see the perspectives for the actual establishment of a site, or several sites, of learning and remembrance for colonialism in Germany? What are your wishes in this respect?

SUY LAN: My wish is that people have the energy to carry on, or that we succeed in repeatedly generating places where we can draw on this energy, or share it with one another. Ultimately, it is individuals and groups that set such processes in motion—and here we are back with the theme of motion that we began with. The central point is coming together. Developing joy and energy, telling one another what is important. Sometimes this happens behind the scenes, with few resources; sometimes it involves large institutions, good resources, money. That is nice, but what remains decisive is that we come together. Movement stops when we stop meeting one another.

Translated from German by Colin Shepherd