

Agata

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SPEAKERS

Agata Siniarska, Christina Stadlbauer

- C** Christina Stadlbauer 00:00
So yeah, thank you very much for finding time to do this with me. I would like to ask you first. Because you have a background in many different things in literature and dance and choreography, and you like to work as a performer and as a dramaturg, but you're also an author. So maybe we can start because this podcast is also about museums and the future of museums. What is your favourite museum? And maybe you want to tell a bit about it and describe how it is? And also describe what you like about it? Or what how it inspires you, In what way?
- A** Agata Siniarska 00:39
Oh, well, it's, it's a little bit hard for me to, to answer that. Because I, always have problems with museums and with galleries. And because I don't understand the time horizon that is there. So sometimes I really want to pass through the corridor, or I just want to pass by the artwork, but knowing that somebody was spending lots of time doing it, it also feels unfair. So I never know, how much time should I commit to the museum visit. And many times, also physically, I feel that I am extremely tired that museums are overcrowded with artworks. And then I don't know if I can take a break or not. So it's always for me, and choreographically problem how, how things are happening, and what's the time, how the time is proposed there. But my favourite Museum at the moment is the Museum of Art, in Lodz in Poland, mainly because I am preparing the project with them. And it's the first museum that I had a chance to see their magazines, and to see their storage, also the

conservation procedures. And that for me opened a completely different view on museum. Because when I got invited, I struggled a lot with all the protocols, how you should be - how you how you need to place the sculptures, what is possible, what no - what is work of art, how you need to deal with it, what's the transport of the work of art, et cetera, et cetera. But then when I could enter from the backstage, it suddenly became an amazing space. And I think this is way more interesting than many times the exhibition. Because, you know, what was fascinating for me, is that the artworks are sitting together on special shelves, or wardrobes, or whatever. And, of course, they are catalogued, but I wonder, who decides which sculptures are sitting close to each other and if they talk to each other, if there is a silence between them, if they become a neighbour or, or a kinship, all these things suddenly became very vivid to me. And, also the way how they need to be checked, or how people are taking care of them. And which ones are more abandoned which ones spend more time in the storage than when they go to the exhibition, do they really want to be exhibited or the artists want them to be exhibited? Who decides? No one asks them. And then of course, this whole material part of them and that actually the matter really wants to change, but the Conservation Department really wants to keep them, freeze them, like out of time and out of place. And they fight with time. It's also fascinating to me that we are thinking globally, that as a human - humankind, we are just a comma in the timeline of the world. But at the same time, we are still trying to freeze the time believing that these artworks will be seen by other generations and so ... That's my moment with the museum.

C Christina Stadlbauer 04:47

Yeah, I like it very much especially the conservation and that it actually goes against nature because nature is - time is just changing everything and we are trying to preserve and then it becomes a bit stiff also, and it loses its life, somehow if we keep on preserving things the way that they were at some point.

A Agata Siniarska 05:08

And then, of course, all this interest in plastic and all this polluting materials that suddenly conservation people from Conservation Department, they need to learn how to deal with them, what new procedures for how to conserve them. And so it's a very, even though that is a conservation and sounds like stiff to freeze - but this is a very vivid science at the moment. And all the time experimenting, and many times asking a question, what is more important, the material of the artwork, or let's say a content of the artwork. What needs to be, for example, reconstructed or what can go away, but somehow it stays in a favour of the theme or of the content of the work. And that's something that they need to - as a group of people - they need to decide together. And especially that if they can't ask the

artist anymore: What to do? It's very interesting, because it's aesthetics with ethics, at the same time. And actually interesting also the that the biggest problem is contemporary artwork. Because the old artworks, they were usually made by marble or by bronze, and the Conservation Department already knows the procedures how to deal with it. And usually these are very strong material that are pretty safe, let's say. But then after the war, first of all, there was lots of poor materials because people didn't have anything else.

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Christina Stadlbauer 06:36

Yes, yeah, it's very interesting. I once was at a conference, and they were talking about the difficulty of digital artworks, and how, as a museum, they have to constantly, they have to store it somehow. And they have to constantly put it from one hard drive to another and make sure that the data doesn't get lost and doesn't deteriorate. So yeah, indeed, it's it's a very, this department I think, is going to get bigger and bigger, because you still need the old. I mean, the old knowledge, but you also add new materials all the time. So you need new knowledge. So I guess we'll all as you say, it's a very vivid department.

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Agata Siniarska 07:11

And actually, maybe that's not a rule. But interesting enough that in the Museum of Art in Lodz, I met only women taking care of the artwork. And I also thought about that, like, How much? Well, women are always taking care of food, of home, of feeling safe or creating a safe space. And somehow they do that for the artwork.

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Christina Stadlbauer 08:20

Very nice. Very nice. So now that we're talking about women, maybe you want to tell us a little bit about your own art practice what you're doing and what is fascinating you about it?

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Agata Siniarska 08:33

Oh, my own art? Well, it's sometimes hard to talk about it, being in it. Especially if I work intensively, then it's very hard for me to step back and say, Okay, this is what it is. And, but what I can say that, I think that what interests me. Okay. So I was thinking that ... that the practice or the procedures of working and working with the material, working with myself working with other people are as much important to me as let's say, a manifestation of this practice, which would we would call an exhibition or performance or spectacle or whatever. And I'm trying to think how I'm inviting people to work. I'm trying to think how I invite the audience to the work and to see how the material also gives me

some guidelines. How I can go through it, how I can work with it. Yeah, not necessary, stating the point that this is where I want to go, even though that I know that I need to go somewhere because, for example, I have a deadline in a theatre, etc. But still how I can go through the material or how I can work through the material rather than about something. I'm trying to do that I don't know how successful I am in it, but at least I'm always doing this attempt.

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Christina Stadlbauer 10:32

Yeah, but I think already if you have this aim, I think you work in a totally different way. I mean, success and failure anyways, are difficult themes in our type of work. But I think, like you say, if you give a lot of attention to the procedure, or the the making of and how you involve people and materials and entities, I think it just gives a totally different quality. Yeah, beautiful. And because I stumbled upon your dance piece: "The soft act of killing". And I like very much the subtitle, it says: "a solar performance for 50,000 dead cells, 10, billions of bacteria 30,000 roentgen radiation per hour, 20 litres of air". So I wanted to ask you, what can - I haven't seen the piece, of course - so what is this piece about, and why do you make such a point of mentioning all these other than humans?

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Agata Siniarska 11:36

Well, first of all, it started from the very basic situation, I was receiving all the time, very little grants for production. And I couldn't work with many people. And I felt extremely lonely, being all the time alone, me my body, my movement, my performance. And I really wanted to see if I can expand it, if actually there is something else in this situation. So I started to look at the situation that the performance is creating, and what else is there, and I based everything on what is not seen. But we know that is there, for example, bacteria, or viruses or sheets or... I started to use a lot of speculation also how these things are with me, and how I can make them evidence in the space through dance. And, of course, some of the things like tectonic movements. I'm not I don't necessarily can do that with dervish dance, but still I was insisting on it. So for me, it was more a game with imagination, how we can bring all this hyper objects like climate change, to the space or to, to the space of our thoughts, or to the space of our imagination, how we can really grasp them something that is so huge that we even don't know how to talk about it. And definitely how it's difficult for us to empathise with them or have a certain compassion towards them. So how they can be more tangible. And for me, that was the way how that was the place where dance comes in. A dance that moves not only the body in space, but moves actually imagination or moves speculation.



Christina Stadlbauer 13:45

Yeah, very nice. You know, I, I like this very much, because I think a lot of artists are suffering from this exact same thing that we feel that - not just artists, anybody - that we feel so lonely, and we don't have any collaborators. But in reality, we have, tonnes of collaborators and we can see. And if we make them collaborators, I think a totally different turn is given to our work. And I love this.



Agata Siniarska 14:12

But it also it also changes this whole idea of the authorship, that for me, was always very difficult - what art market - it is still difficult - what the art market proposes. So everything is based on the name. This magic is a magic bio, and the institutions that stands behind you and support you and make you a great artist. And of course, it is important to thank people for standing behind us. Who give us financial support, who give us emotional support. It is extremely important. We are never alone in this journey. But it's also not only our idea. There would be never - I don't believe there is the one artwork that belongs to one person's idea. We are constantly thinking together, even if we are not doing a thinking session or mind maps or whatever we are in constant dialogue with everything. And I think it only depends on us how much we are open to all these dialogues, all this relations that are everywhere. But I think we can learn from everything. And everything can be really fascinating. It's just a matter of really looking, for.



Christina Stadlbauer 15:38

Very nice. Yes, I love it. Um, maybe we - because when I met you first through a publication that you shared in April 2020, during the lockdown, and it was a text that was written earlier, but you then adapted it slightly during the pandemic. And it's a text about the handshake. It's called: "I mean, it's all a matter of touch". And it's about the handshake. And you explore in detail what happens when people come together and shake each other's hand. And I was very fascinated with this. Because I think it's such a, you're scrutinising, you are looking so deeply and so detailed to something that is so normal to us. And you're really kind of trying to unfold what is happening in this very normal moment that you make this - Yeah, suddenly, I had a revelation almost. And of course, everybody knows the handshake. And we all know that it's a ritual, but suddenly, when reading your texts, and also because you're talking about the bacteria that are being exchanged in that moment, so I was very impressed with this. And this is how I contacted you then. And then I found out that this text is part of a book. And maybe we can talk a little bit about this book, because you take a quite radical position in this essay, or in this text, because you're not authoring it. So I would like you to tell a little bit about this process of deciding to not put your name there. And why you decided this.

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Agata Siniarska 17:20

I really want to destabilise this idea of author. And even though the death of the author was already announced some time ago, I think it's still extremely present. So I was wondering how much it is possible to write with, others, or what or what would be the format of writing together. And

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Christina Stadlbauer 17:56

and when you talk about together, you mean, in this case, it's all the entities that make us up. So it's all the bacteria and the cells. And everything that is living inside of us.

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Agata Siniarska 18:05

I started this project in 2016, and that was also this moment when everyone started to speak about bacteria in the gut, and how much it influences our emotional state. So that was already a revelation - on every airport, you could find this book, I don't remember right now the title - about gut and bacteria and emotionality. And so, slowly people started to talk about that. So I felt like also through speculation how I can go one step further. And to see if actually, if bacteria influence our emotional state, I'm sure they influence our thinking, and that's our ideas, our artistic ideas. So of course, I was doing lots of research around bacteria, around spreading bacteria, exchanging bacteria, etc. And I was trying to be precise as science because what interests me is also the certain protocol or certain language that comes from science that many times we take for granted, because we are not scientists. So we completely believe that if it's like this, this is how it is. So I really, I really like this idea of establishing the worlds or establishing the truth, creating the truth through scientific language. And I thought, okay, we can also put all the speculation through the certain format of scientific language and then make it happen.

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Christina Stadlbauer 19:50

Yes, yes. And coming back to this authoring. I mean, how who, because in the book, it really didn't say your name. It says in the end by the publisher that there are many other books published, and then you can kind of find out that you are the author. But you didn't put any author. So if you cite the book, what are you supposed to cite? If you quote it?

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Agata Siniarska 20:18

No, I think that on the, on the second page, there are three names. It's mine, Alice Hayward, who was helping with proofreading, and Salomé was doing the drawings, but

we our names, stated with all the viruses that were happening in that moment when we were working. So for example, one of us was sick, a little bit sick. So this virus is also mentioned in the credits. There are mentioned some bacteria, there are mentioned some I think, caffeine, if I remember well, et cetera. So we placed our names among all these influences this extra influences?

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Christina Stadlbauer 21:10

Yeah, so it's quite a radical stance, it's quite a radical way of, of seeing it, but I like it very much. And I think actually, now slowly, also, with the books that are coming out, and the philosophers that are dealing with these kind of issues, I think slowly, maybe there is a shift happening in our understanding of who we are, and how we have to relate to our environment, and to all these non visible and visible entities that are also there.

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Agata Siniarska 21:39

I think the authorship is important in order to take a responsibility. So I think there's also a danger in creating a group or collective that everyone is there, and no one takes a stands or no one takes responsibility. So I also understand that it's not about either, or, I think it's it's all the time, a combination. I also tried in a collective for seven years, we were trying to make a horizontal way of working together. And we really, were shifting all the possible procedures that sometimes one person was taking more, one person was taking less work. Sometimes we were really spending lots of time deciding on a font in our newsletter, until the moment that really the three of us agreed. So I think to make a collective stands or to make a collective decision it's really, really hard work. And sometimes when I hear how easily people are also using these horizontal structures, etc. I have some doubts about that. It would be great. But I think if we don't have that much knowledge to work like this, I think we are so accustomed with this one person, one, one name that holds on everything, that it's very difficult, I think, for us to say okay, but actually, I'm a part of something. And this is how the decisions are going to happen.

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Christina Stadlbauer 23:26

Yes, I totally agree what you say also with this horizontal structures, because very often it's so difficult that the whole collective or the whole project just fails, because it's too difficult to really work horizontally. So I totally follow what you're saying. And I think maybe I never thought about this in this way. But maybe indeed, it's a very parallel way of trying to understand that horizontal is difficult, but also including all the other entities that are around us is also difficult, and they are actually quite parallel ways of approaching our actions. Yeah.

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Agata Siniarska 24:07

Yeah, I think that's for me when I started this project was not that important, if it's really a truth or not, but how much it can expand our understanding of the world or our situation our being in the world, how much we can also see what is around, see what also builds us; situations that we are in and how we can be everyday more and more aware. It was more an exercise of expanding attention.

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Christina Stadlbauer 24:49

Yeah. So if you take this understanding into this situation that we are facing now with the virus and with the pandemic, because I sometimes wonder what is the real crisis? I mean, of course there's a disease and of course, many people get sick. And of course, we have to deal with this situation. But I have been wondering is, do you think that this crisis we experience is maybe also a manifestation of our obsession with humanity and our obsession with how we are doing things?

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Agata Siniarska 25:23

That I mean, definitely, it's, I mean, it's still, for me difficult to talk about it. Because every day, I'm getting different news. And I really don't know what to follow anymore. But I think what is extremely crucial in the situation, is the fact that this pandemic is happening in the first world, basically Western Europe and United States. And suddenly, this world that was so stable, and so beautiful, suddenly, it gets attacked. And that's why this panic, I think it's so huge, because viruses are happening since many, many years, many different parts of the world. But there were barely news about them. No one did care. But right now, it touched the core of humanity. No, I'm saying this, of course, in brackets. So I think we've believed so much as people, as citizens of this part of the world, that we will just develop more and more, and we will get more and more advantages, then suddenly, it just became extremely big crisis - but how is that possible that it touches us? And that's why also so many racist talks about about this virus, calling it the Chinese virus, because it can't be from / because of us. It has to be coming from somewhere else, and it touches our borders. And, as a European or Western world, we are obsessed with the borders.

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Christina Stadlbauer 27:07

You also write in the same book, that we are trying to control everything, we're trying to control dirt, we're trying to control our own smell. We're trying to control the bacteria that are around us or own us, we're trying to be over hygienic. So I think in a way, what you're describing here that it's a problem of the first world, it's also in a way a problem of control,

because this is very difficult to control what we are facing.

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Agata Siniarska 27:33

Absolutely. What is more, if we come back to, to the beginning of our conversation, talking about the museum and the conservation of the artworks, we are also obsessed with youth. And we are trying to freeze the time and we are so much afraid of disintegration that comes with our bodies getting older. So of course we want to be young forever, beautiful forever, clean, pure, smelling well, etc. Of course, it's absolutely, we are all control freaks. And the first thing is that we so easily call the other "the parasite, the virus" or the enemy. There's lots of military language, also talking about this virus. But who had the chance to stay at home when there was lockdown and who had to work? Who got money, the sectors got financial support and who can't get this money? Who has insurance? And who doesn't have? This showed very, very clearly how does it work? And I think that's also the problem that we do not see - and I'm also like that, I'm saying it to myself, because I also don't see - how our world, how our Western world, how is it related to other parts of the world? Or how the actions of Western world are producing different actions in different parts of the world. We don't know how to look further on. We are very much in the borders of Western European gaze.

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Christina Stadlbauer 29:30

Yeah, we're very European centred, also. First World centred, I mean, if you listen to the news, indeed, it's always about Europe and the US...

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Agata Siniarska 29:38

We take lots of privileges from it. So of course, it's obvious. We attach also to certain idea of humanity. But there was a beautiful talk between Bruno Latour and Donna Haraway because Bruno Latour wrote this book "Down to Earth", when he claimed that we need to land on Earth, we need to come back to the earth we need to go down. And Donna Haraway, in this talk between them says: okay, but some people never lost this connection, they never went up, they never went somewhere else, they stayed with the land, they worked with the land since generations, it's just a certain part of people that got to go somewhere, to a certain Elysium. And now they need to come down, because there's a climate crisis and cetera.

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Christina Stadlbauer 30:35

Yes. So staying with the crisis for another moment, what do you think are we denying in

this crisis? I mean, what is the thing that we maybe don't look at? And at the same time, is there something that we can learn from the virus, not so much from our behaviour, but from this so called attack that the viruses is now doing on us? And I'm thinking also about - because you're talking about Latour and Haraway - about the difference between collaboration instead of competition? So what is the denial here? And what is the possibility to learn?

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Agata Siniarska 31:13

It think, well, that's the answer for today, maybe tomorrow, I will have a better reflection on that - but you need to forgive me, it is very difficult for me to, to reflect upon this situation. But I think we deny time. And that's also connected with climate crisis, that we really, that our governments are making the decisions for another few years, but not looking at it in 30 to 50 or 100 years. So there's no like a generation of time, we say it is always now, and very close future. I think we deny also our privileges. And very easily, we can talk about what's not working, but actually work is to take a stand and say this is my privileges. This is where I'm situated. I think it's very difficult. And I think we also deny the fact how Europe, and I'm talking all the time about the context of Western Europe, let's say because United States also something a little bit different. I don't have that much knowledge, let's say being situated in Western Europe, I think that there is a denial how much Europe is actually segregated? Or how much Europe is not one. This is not one group. We are extremely divided. There's so many different groups in it. And there is a lot of division between this group economical, especially, I think, economical divisions, I think we do not talk that much anymore about class division. But somehow it stayed with Marxism, and now Neo Marxism and it's just in this box, and we do not touch the subject that much. What's the class division in Western Europe? I think it's all a bit under that. But I think this actually shows very clearly. What's the class division?

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Christina Stadlbauer 33:39

Yes. And in that sense, we are back to this collaboration instead of competition, because the classes are the economic, it's all about competition. And against the virus, it's also about competition in reality. So yeah, I am always wondering if there is a major shift in this understanding that still really has to happen. That, because I'm thinking also of Margulies, Lynn Margulis, the biologist, who came up with a theory that was really revolutionary different and people just couldn't, they couldn't absorb it. They couldn't understand they couldn't believe that this is how maybe evolution was happening. Instead of competition, there was a collaboration happening. So I think although she was active in the 70s, and 80s, and 90s. And there's nowadays maybe the biologists and natural scientists are slowly understanding this, but there is still so embedded in us and it seems to be very difficult to

rethink this, that we are that we are in a world of competition.

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Agata Siniarska 34:48

Yes, and I think it's connected with the fact that most of this situation for most of the things we understand through the development but this kind of development in diagonal. And at the bottom, there is a failure, on the top there is success. And we do not see that the relations can have completely different lines. And that that's this whole idea of evolutionary development is also out of date, seeing us on the top of the pyramid of the world, because there's so many, so many other relations. And if we take different parameters that suddenly this pyramid does not make any sense. We are so much disabled in in so many things. Like, our vision, our perception is sometimes so narrowed, we can't compete with different species, who can see so much hear so much, communicate differently orientate in the space so differently. Yeah.

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Christina Stadlbauer 36:05

Yes, I agree very much with what you say. So, if we now come back to museums, or let's say, more general, the big art institutions, I think they have a role in how society positions itself towards the world, because they show the world in a certain way, the art world, the natural science world, I mean, the anthropology, whatever you're looking at, they are showing the world in a certain way. And by being a visitor or by being audience, you become the one who is educated in this. So they have a responsibility and a role there. So what do you think? How could they shift or how could they change their... What needs to be changed in this context, to allow the shift that we have been talking about to actually happen and to become visible and obvious?

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Agata Siniarska 37:03

What a question. Oh,

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Christina Stadlbauer 37:11

you don't have to give an answer, but do you think it's even necessary that they change? or what should we do with museums? Because I think they really have quite a, how can I say, they have quite a position in, in how they sell, how people should look at the world? And so I wonder if now everything is changing and shifting and being re-evaluated - what kind of role can they take or how could they make this? How could they manifest this?

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Agata Siniarska 37:38

Well, maybe- well, the first thing that comes to my head is education. And maybe museums could be new schools, or to take to be alternative way of education. Maybe that could be how we can also learn through art, or through artistic activities. And when I'm thinking about artistic activities, I'm not only thinking about making sculptures, but also looking at them, perceiving them. That's already I think, artistic practice. And I think there is not enough education, artistic education at schools. How to be with the artwork, how to, not only how to ask this question, what is it about? Because I think this is also many times irrelevant. It is how to be with it, how to companion, accompany it, in time, in space, and between materials. Yes, so maybe that's also, I wish that Museum is this space that we really want to go always or to sit or to be there to spend some time; to read a little bit, to look at something to take a short nap, to wake up to, to miss something. This kind of exclusive time that may be the street can't give us but at the same time, the question would be how not only how to bring people to the museum, but how the museum can go to the people. And I know this, I heard about this project. It's a Museum of Contemporary Art in Georgia. If I'm not mistaken, I would have to look at it. It's a museum in the suitcase. And because apparently they don't have a Museum of Contemporary Art. They didn't get subsidised, so they decided to document all the artworks of contemporary works in Georgia, and they put everything to the suitcase. So in order to visit a museum, you visit them - to come to you with the suitcase. And then they tell the story. And I think it's also very beautiful idea. Of course, you need the artworks mediated via the documentation, probably photographic documentation, but also still the story. But maybe that is the storytelling, I think that there's a huge potential in it, how we can be together. So how the museum could say, also tell the stories and bring the stories towards the others. That is wonderful.

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Christina Stadlbauer 40:47

It's wonderful and I think this person who comes to your house to tell the story, I mean, there's a totally different encounter with the material of the museum, because there's a personal introduction to it. So it's being really presented to you, it becomes a much more active and much more participatory way of visiting. Yes, yeah.

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Agata Siniarska 41:09

I think that they can enter the museum because they're not prepared to see something or experience something that they need more knowledge. And so there's this fear of what they're going to see and if their knowledge is enough to meet the artwork in a museum. But I think that the, ideally, every artwork is - I like this metaphor of a cake, with many layers. And when you cut it, cut the piece, you see all the layers, and it depends on you, if

you eat all the layers maybe you would like only two or maybe only one, but it's still relevant, because it's still the cake. And I think that every opinion is also relevant with what you come and you meet the artwork. This is one of the layers, this is as relevant, you don't need to no matter what kind of theoretical apparatus in order to decode everything, what is happening there. Of course, some of us, we can do that some of us less, but it doesn't mean that it's less relevant, this experience for you.

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Christina Stadlbauer 42:27

I love this metaphor of the museum as a cake. It's very nice. And it's I think you're totally right. And coming back again, to the beginning of our conversation, when you were telling that you now have a totally different experience of the museum in Lodz. So I think this is what it is about that you get to see the background, you get to see the making off, you get to see who works with it. So I think the museum as a cake is a very nice metaphor. Yeah, and maybe we can stop here. If you have something more to say, then of course we can. But I think from my side, I have asked many questions. And I think we have explored many things. Yes. And thanks a lot again, for making time.

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Agata Siniarska 43:08

My pleasure. So, if you need anything, please let me know, and have a good day and good luck.

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Christina Stadlbauer 43:14

Yeah. All right. Take care. Bye bye.