

Politics of labelling and Politics of dance techniques Report on the session De-colonizing Dance: Postcoloniality and contemporaneity

By Guy Cools

The German dance scholars Gabriele Klein and Claude Jansen invited two generations of African choreographers, the Senegalese Germaine Acogny and the South-African Mamela Nyamza talk about their work. In order to contextualize this the dance scholars created a label that fitted the themes of the Tanzkongress: De-colonizing Dance: Postcoloniality and Contemporaneity.

The two sessions, spread out over a whole day proved highly inspirational because of the generosity and the honesty of the invited artists to give an insight in both their creative practice and their personal history but also proved how problematic the politics of labelling have become in our society and how labels are still (ab)used to (re)install hierarchies of values.

The day starts with a short warm up by Germaine Acogny in which she immediately establishes for all participants a sense of togetherness and belonging through an energetic and somatic exchange. In *Être Ensemble*,¹ one of the first publications on the subject of collaboration in dance Miriam Van Imschoot states in her contribution, *Letters on Collaboration*, that the increasing discussions and publications on the topic of collaboration and 'togetherness' – the 'Genossenschaft' in 'Zeitgenossenschaft' - actually indicates a deep crisis of these subjects in our contemporary, Western society, also in the art world. Acogny's warm up however shows that this crisis might be a typical Western phenomena and is not necessarily shared by her own culture.

After the warm up Gabriele Klein gives a short introductory lecture framing the discussions of the day within the research project she leads at the Hamburg University: *Translating and Framing. Practices of transformations, which 'deals with African dance and the question of how it is being translated into a contemporary dance context.'* Klein gives an overview of how the label of 'modern art' transformed into 'contemporary art' in 'a global art market orientated on a Western aesthetic' since the 1990ies.

Similar to Klein, the Belgian art sociologist Rudi Laermans describes in his recent book, *Moving Together, Theorizing and Making Contemporary Dance* how 'art is a proper name that can be given to whatever kind of artefact for whatever reason.'² Following theoreticians such as the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu or the Belgian art theoretician Thierry de Duve, Laermans discusses how art labels are always performative and how 'every contemporary art world is a social arena in which the participants constantly struggle with uneven weapons over the symbolic capital to define legitimate art.'³ The Tanzkongress focus on Contemporaneity offered different formats to reflect critically on these politics of labelling something 'contemporary art'.

In her introductory lecture Klein continues to discuss how since the beginning of the 21st century, 'many authors dealing with the notion of contemporaneity within the art discourse, criticize a notion of contemporaneity that is exclusively oriented on Western art tradition.' British-Indian dance scholar Royana Mitra offers in her recent monography on Akram Khan, *Dancing New Interculturalism* another good example of Klein's analysis. Mitra criticizes the use of the label contemporary as a way to contemporise, that is westernise, non-Western dance forms such as, for instance, in 'contemporary kathak'. 'This label suggested that in order to be contemporary an art form must first be westernised, revealing a problematic equation between contemporisation and westernisation in Western dance discourse.'⁴ Klein concludes her lecture: 'Among artists from all over the world, it is therefore no secret anymore that they only become part of the globalised market of 'contemporary art', operated by the West when they label their art 'contemporary' and as a result 'contemporary dance created new hegemonic practices of in- and exclusion.'

The rest of the morning Acogny gives an insight in her personal technique by a practical class and an overview of her choreographic work⁵ and its synchronicity with major dates in global history: for instance starting a dance school in Senegal as a single, divorced mother in 1968 or creating the epic piece *Afrique, Le Corps Memorable* in tribute to president Senghor in 1989. Through her personal (hi)story and discourse the problematic politics of labelling are further highlighted. Acogny articulates gently her frustration that in the beginning her specific repertoire of sixty signature movements or techniques were not recognized as contemporary because they are either referencing elements that belong to a specific African, animist cosmology such as, for instance, associating the heart or chest with the sun and the pelvic area with the moon or 'pedestrian' movements of her own culture and environment, like working in the fields or grinding and preparing the food. 'Our body memory is influenced by the environment we grow up in, whether it is the forest, the sea or an urban environment and this results in different dances.'

She also mentions how different countries and different periods have used the labels in different ways: how for instance African choreographers like herself or Koffi Kokko were part of the French 'nouvelle danse' of the 1980ies and how programs of the French government such as 'Afrique Création' supported the development of a contemporary, African dance scene. In the Q&A at the end of the morning, she also acknowledges how throughout her career, she fought for the recognition of African dance as art and how she consciously had to play the politics of labelling calling her own technique consecutively 'modern, African dance'; 'contemporary, African dance' and eventually 'Germaine Acogny technique'. With this strategy of further personalizing the label of her dance, Acogny indirectly confirms the ideas that sociologist Richard Sennett develops in *The Craftsman*, that in Western history, the stress on originality and uniqueness and the shift from a collectively owned craft to the individual genius of the

artist, already took place in Renaissance, mainly as a branding pattern where 'distinction of this sort (that is naming the individual maker) carried material rewards.'⁶

In the afternoon the South-African choreographer, Mamela Nyamza, introduced by the German dance researcher Claude Jansen, picks up the thread where Acogny left it. She starts with a short solo performance in which she used the presentation principles of the solos of Boris Charmatz' Musée de la Danse, 20 dancers for the XX century to deconstruct her own solo, explaining as well the things you don't see. Sitting with her naked back to the audience, she embarks on an autobiographical monologue: 'I feel so colonized. Just by sitting here and being the other. I have always been the other, even at home in Africa.' Nyamza explains how her identity as an artist has been formed by a politics of dance techniques: living in the townships in Cape Town, she went to study ballet, 'the elite thing', which not only offered her an aura of being 'the cool kid' but also a safer place. She continues to describe how going to see ballet performances for the first time, everyone would take pictures of the one row of black kids in a whole white audience. How after 1994 and the end of Apartheid, they finally had a bus to go the school. The last anecdote puts the central quote by Christine De Smedt of Krassimira Kruschkova's opening lecture again in another perspective. 'How did you get together? By train' versus 'I wouldn't be here without that bus.'

After her short performance Jansen and Nyamza continue to give a brief overview of Nyamza's oeuvre: the solo *Isingqala* (2011) in which she channels and takes on different male identities; *Wena Mamela* (2014) in which she uses the memory of her grandmother calling out to her, to criticize an exoticised gaze that looks at women as puppets and *The Meal* (2012) in which she constantly shifts her identity and creates hybrid forms between ballet and African dance, for instance by putting a blanket on top of her tutu, creating 'the bump', which is stereotypically associated with African dance. 'Being on points becomes a metaphor for the violence and pain one suffers while the African dance heritage grounds me and connects me to my ancestors.'

Similar to how the South-African choreographer George Khumalo Mxolisi described his education at PARTS⁷, the hybrid mixture of dance techniques both creates a confusion in which you temporarily lose yourself and allows for the creation of an unique, artistic identity that navigates the complexity of all the influences it is formed of.

In the final Q&A session at the end of the day both Nyamza and Acogny further discuss their love/hate relationships with the politics of dance technique. Acogny describes how starting ballet only at the age of 19, she had to confront the prejudices against African dance being considered no technique and to fight for the recognition that 'our dances are as complex as any other dances.' While Nyamza reconfirms her 'love/hate relationship' with ballet which has shaped and helped her, but which she needs to deconstruct to feel free.

When someone in the audience asks them how they both feel inside the Tanzkongress, Nyamza confesses that she still feels too much 'the other'. Having looked forward to see Germaine Acogny perform parts of her most recent solo, *A un endroit du Début* (2015) as part of Charmatz' Musée de la Danse, 20 dancers for the XX century, she discovered there weren't many other black bodies presented. Similarly Nyamza also criticizes the absence of African dance scholars.

Acogny puts the subject of African dance scholarship in a historical perspective and underlines that the discussion of African dance already started in the 80ies with for instance the work of Johannes Odenthal at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin and how different countries, depending on their colonial past, framed the discussion in a different way. One could add to Acogny's examples many others, for instance the edition of the FIND in Montréal in 1999 which had a strong focus on African Dance, being framed by a conference on Dance: Distinct Language and Cross-Cultural Influences⁸ in which major African dance scholars did have a distinct voice. Acogny continues to discuss the reception of her work, both at home and in Europe and also pleads that the African governments have to take more responsibility for their own culture and artists.

Asked what kind of role, she plays in her own community, Nyamza confirms Acogny's plead of taking up one's own responsibility. Even if in a country like South-Africa, the economic power is still in the hands of a white elite who function as gate keepers, Nyamza's has taken up a position at the South-African Arts Council in order for 'our generation to create the proper conditions for the next one.'

When finally asked if they both feel comfortable with how their work has been framed within the debate on (de-)colonisation, Acogny answers generously that she doesn't feel imprisoned by this frame, while Nyamza admits that she didn't like the title of the session. 'We don't have a word for de-colonizing in my language and I still feel colonized, being here.' Also Klein and Jansen admit that creating this specific label was the only way to give Acogny and Nyamza place and a voice in the program and another member of the audience has to come to their rescue, stating that 'maybe it is our de-colonisation and cleansing process, more than theirs.'

All through the day, the politics of labelling stay omnipresent. Maybe a next edition of the Tanzkongress could take the courageous decision to throw away all labels and themes and offer the floor just to the artists, worldwide to talk about their practices and concerns. Nyamza and Acogny do have the last word today, again sharing generously their practices. Nyamza teaches the participants a hybrid movement combining ballet and Zulu dance and Acogny brings everybody together a last time in a circle to pass on the energy and then send it off into the world.

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Notes

¹ Miriam Van Imschoot, 'Lettres sur la Collaboration', in: Claire Rousier (ed), *Être Ensemble, Figures de la communauté en danse depuis le XXe siècle*, Paris : Centre National de la Danse, 2003. pp. 335-367.

² Rudi Laermans, *Moving Together, Theorizing and Making Contemporary Dance* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2015), p. 68.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

⁴ Royna Mitra, Akram Khan, *Dancing New Interculturalism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 9

⁵ See also Germaine Acogny, *Danse Africaine, Afrikanischer Tanz, African Dance* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Dieter Fricke, 1988).

⁶ Richard Senett, *The Craftsman* (London: Penuin, 2008), p. 69.

⁷ Khumalo, George Mxolisi, 'Processen die tijd nodig hebben: in gesprek met Marainne Van Kerkhoven', in: *Etcetera* 87 (2003), pp. 7-10.

⁸ Chantal Pontbriand (ed.), *Dance: Distinct Language and Cross-Cultural Influences*. (Montreal: Parachute, 2001).