



# European Dancehouse Network

## Conference Inventur #2 Notes on Inventur#2, by Sandra Noeth

### Questions, as strong as answers. Notes on Inventur#2

The very idea of the inventory seems persuasive: meticulously organized lists and maps, recording, recollecting and storing competing and concurrent legacies, securing knowledge: lost movements, dusty gestures, bodies yet to come. However, there is a certain uneasiness that comes with the sense of finality, completeness and conclusion that the idea of the archive carries and that is bound to failure when performing it on a moving target like the body: a disquietude, that re-occurs at several moments, on- and off-stage, during the three days of *Inventur 2*, and that indicates the question of how to respond – choreographically, performatively, discursively – to our times: Times, that are marked by various acts of transformation, with the body at core. Times, in which epistemologies are interwoven and co-existing and in which multiple absent and present bodies are hand in glove. Times that challenge our means and forms of representation as we are confronted with the necessity to respond to experiences that we cannot, or: no longer, share. Times, in which we live and witness crisis and conflicts that are not bound to delimitable geopolitical territories or distinct events, but that take on environmental qualities – while seeming to be far away, “elsewhere”, they already now affect our bodies, our imaginary, our vision and words; our privileges, as well. These dynamics, small ruptures or powerful acts of destabilization, bring forth the question of the status of the body in contemporary societies and politics, and of the status of the artist, of arts, in the process. Reality check.

Shifting grounds are part of the daily practices of Mozambican choreographer Panaibra Gabriel Canda and his Brazilian colleague Lia Rodrigues, and their dialoguing lectures give us insights in their multi-faceted choreographic projects. Built at the intersections of artistic creation, education and community work, they negotiate local contexts as well as the protocols of international arts markets. Their panel is titled *Bodies in Crisis/Dance in Crisis*, indicating the challenges and the violence that menace the physical as well as the symbolic integrity of the body in in their respective realities in Rio de Janeiro and Maputo. However, both artists refuse to reduce the idea of crisis to its destructive effects and its spectacular force. Rather than describing crisis as a state of exception, they point out its systemic qualities that condition their artistic and personal lives not only as a weakness, but also as a strength: as an opportunity to learn with and from each other, to explore the potentials of self-education and – organisation, and “*to reinvent ourselves, to make space to exist as dance-makers.*” Their forceful criticism on common narratives of the crisis (in the field of dance and beyond)

is also a claim as it reminds us that our actions come not without consequences: there is no possibility to stay outside, in a safe and non-situated position. Consequently, Lia Rodrigues and Panaibra Gabriel Canda opened up parts of their session and invited the public to question their own involvement and motivations: to get in touch with each other and exchange about how and why we engage in arts and society; an opportunity, as I experienced it, to invest ourselves in exchanging about our individual or shared questions rather than translating the urgency of the crisis into an urgency of finding (too quick or general) answers: ...*in what ways can contemporary dance dialogue with situations of crisis, and should it, at all? In places where rupture is a norm, how can it find solutions that are not bound to pre-existing models? Is art capable of producing such modes that allow for fair and sustainable opportunities and that don't create privileges for some and inequality for others? How to generate mechanisms of inclusion that take into account other thoughts, other knowledge, in a reality where thinking, creating and presenting contemporary dance is still judged from a Western point of view? And: does speaking of crisis work on the condition that the latter shakes Western privileges? How do we, as dance-makers, deal, develop practices that encourage tolerance and diversity? Or is dance at risk to fall into extremism and re-produce anti-globalist tendencies?*.... to be continued.

The experience of moving across and through a variety of entangled territories marks also the panel *Globalism/Postcolonialism. Grown-ups rolling like madmen in the market-place*. Interweaving different performative and discursive modes of listening, Jay Pather, Achille Mbembe, Nora Chipaumire and Opiyo Okach take the discussion from their own trans-national practices and research. To start with, Jay Pather reminds us that the intensified interest that art institutions and practitioners in contemporary dance and performance have shown over the last two decades in topics of globalization and trans-culturalism comes not without ambivalence and contradiction. Inevitable in light of the deep transformations in the order of the world, our efforts risk to fall short of the mark when relying on the idea that dance represents an intrinsically humanist practice. Such romantic or universalistic tropes fail to capture, according to him, the actual unequal power relations that condition the politics of seeing and of accessing dance on a global scale. In resonance with this, Achille Mbembe, in a two-part, pre-recorded video, reflects on the entangled questions of the *Borders of Violence* and the *Violence of the Border*. He describes how borders have become portable, mobile and everyday due to intensified networks, technological or biometrical developments, and a renewed interest that securitization and military practice consequently took in the body. Furthermore, he contends that not only the border but also the quality and form of violence that it carries has changed in the process. Introducing Gaza as a paradigmatic example, he shows how an apparatus that works on a systematic withdrawal of care and obligation has been set in place. In this dispositive, the body, as he argues, is no longer primarily disciplined or exploited in labour, for instance. Rather, the abandonment and vulnerability of the body is normalized; “*disposable people*” are produced and their unclear status of belonging grounds legal and political arguments to not protect them. Achille Mbembe ultimately calls for a new consciousness of our planetary condition that shares sovereignty with other living entities. Such a project makes the reconfiguration of the body inevitable, as well, beyond excessive, identity-related categories that continue to be operate in the field of dance, as well: in our aesthetic choices, funding politics, institution, etc. – Matters of identity in connection to the body are also key to Nora Chipaumire and Opiyo Okach’s performative and spoken interventions. From an East African and in particular Kenyan point of view, Opiyo Okach offers to re-contextualize the notions of globalization and post-coloniality. Drawing on his

experience of creating choreographic work across Africa and Europe, for instance, he suggests that the co-existence and multiplicity of languages and cultures has, historically speaking, always been a constitutive element in African dance, long before contemporary dance practice and theory took it on. While defending the values of collaboration, he suggests to use the potential of different perspectives as a ground to reflect on the relevance and conditions of our working- and being-together, as well as its boundaries. While equally underlining the importance of opening up dance to different audiences and spaces, Zimbabwe-born artist Nora Chipaumire undermines, however, that speaking is not enough. Conceiving of the body as a manifest, she claims that artists from the global South, for instance, cannot limit themselves on struggling with the past but rather need to claim a presence and a future through their work, through aesthetics. The challenge is, following her, to understand what works in which context, and to learn to speak the language of the townships, of periphery, of the everyday, of the street, e.g., in an effort to reorganise the body in each of these contexts; in an effort to not get tired and stuck in past glory or soft diplomacy, as much of Western dance has done in her perception.

The intersections of the political, the corporeal and the theoretical defined the third panel that I visited, as well, in which Susan Leigh Foster, Janez Janša, Rabih Mroué and Anurima Banerji convened. Susan Leigh Foster took her own practice as a dance scholar, educator and writer as an entry point into her reflections on the kinaesthetic-political. In what provided a pertinent framework for the panel, she describes dance, *“choices embedded in choreography,”* as one of the most crucial sites that enable a critical reflection on how we experience our body. Our body – any body – that, as she argues, is always constructed and historically as well as culturally specific. Acknowledging that the body informs us about and helps us to explore the world, she outlines the potential that lies in engaging in a *“political work of noticing, analysing, sharing and learning from one another (...) and hopefully sustaining a process of negotiation that embraces conflict, but not violence.”* Yet, she asks why the kinaesthetic seems to be frequently neglected and disregarded in inquiries that analyse the nature of the political – an inquiry into the relation between arts and the political that all presentations in the panel shared. For instance, Rabih Mroué tells us about an incident that happened when exhibiting one of his artworks on the outside walls of a museum in Austria – a poster that combined the image of a bomb with written text in Arabic language. A by-passer reacted by calling the police, and he takes this incident as starting point to share different speculations on the reasons for her action with us. This detail points us to the unclear status that artworks might inhabit or activate; it also shows how meaning is made up in a process in which lived experience, history, fiction, imagination and myth, for instance, collapse. Thus, acknowledging that our actions and experiences, our representations and interpretations exist always in context, as Rabih Mroué suggest, does not argue for controlling our imagination. Rather, it reminds us of our responsibility for seeing things, for things seen. – The problem of locating our experiences and actions comes back, from a different angle, in Janez Janša’s contribution, where he asks: *“What does it mean to be – or not to be – in the right place, in the right time? And whom does it put in motion?”* Drawing on iconic examples from art history as well as personal memories of gestures, movements and choreographies, he reflects on how structures of power are mobilized or immobilized and how improvisation comes into play when a body is out of place: unexpected, unwanted, slightly aside. What kind of agency is embedded in these instances, and what is there potential for *“politics by other means”*, as Anurima Banerji formulates it in her talk. She takes on the example of a recent controversy in India that evolved around a group of artists who returned their national awards

to protest the increasing normalization of (everyday) violence against minorities in the country. In the process, she observed that the dancers and performing artists, with few exceptions, failed to stand up as a community. This opens up for more general reflections on the relation between the aesthetic, the political, and the corporeal: how is the trope of the dissident artist constructed but also misused to strengthen hegemony, for example, in present in many modern societies, associating creativity with innovation? And when does dance function as an emblem of nationalism, as a key practice in soft diplomacy or as a form of political persuasion? When does the body replicate, internalize and physicalize essentialist models of intrinsic discipline, conformity and regulation, and serve as an agent in external political space rather than an agent of change and resistance?

Those and many other questions stay with me following my personal trajectory through *Inventur #2*. They indicate different kinds of borders and boundaries that condition our artistic, theoretical, curatorial and organizational practices in the dance and performance today. Borders that influence how we imagine and experience the world: symbolic, immaterial strategies and dynamics of in- and exclusion, those in the minds of people, in our minds, that are maybe the harshest ones to cross.

In summary, many of the contributors called for situating our experience and knowledge, to be more precise in our gestures and movements and the way we set up artistic and non-artistic encounters. I read this not as an invitation to further close down, dominate or control the physical and symbolic territories that we move in but, on the contrary, as a way to counter cultural and political relativism; as a way to de-normalize the categories and concepts that we find at the heart of our archives and inventories and that might have become all too familiar. What stayed with me most distinctly across the individual cases and specific contexts that the contributors shared is a recurring investigation into an ethical dimension that many identified in their reflections of arts and politics. This includes questions of responsibility – of vulnerability and care, of listening and action – that cannot be limited down to directive, moralist recommendations. Rather, the different lectures, dialogues and performances pointed to a place where our positions as “experts”, where the meaning of being “innovative”, “relevant” or “experimental” needs to be up for negotiation again. This investment that *Inventur #2* opened up to is long term and subject to many more encounters in which the inventory of dance, performance and choreography sets out to unfold its speculative forces.

**Sandra Noeth**  
8 October 2017