



European Dancehouse Network

Conference Inventur #2 A Summary, by Pia Bendfeld

Inventur, taking stock – that means a reassessment of the current status quo. What do we have, what is lacking? Twelve years after the first Viennese Inventur, the international dance and performance scene again reflects on its contemporary situation -this time in Düsseldorf-, discussing new challenges arising from sociopolitical developments.

In 2005, the inaugural Inventur format took place. The conference was marked by euphoria over a newly forming Europe with the Eastern Bloc States, and people were celebrating dance. In the meantime, this enthusiasm, in the face of the current state of affairs, became overshadowed by a realistic seriousness. The three days at tanzhaus nrw are very similar to a crisis meeting help by the creative stakeholders, among them renowned choreographers, dancers and art theoreticians who have to judge and debate their positions given present global events.

New panels with high-profile guest speakers describe the palpable problems brought about by neo-liberalism, racism and postcolonialism, to negotiate them within the plenum. This analysis aims to quest for constructive courses of action. How can ideas be implemented innovatively, how can one conquer existing, outmoded patterns to react to the unsettling global situation?

Existing boundaries must be overcome – geographical as well as mental ones. Despite a globalised, postcolonial world with its accompanying phenomena of distances growing closer and overlapping cultural identities, stereotypical thinking still endures. A strengthening identification with one's own nation leads to the deployment of right-wing movements in Western societies. This paradox lies within the regular experience of dances of African origin, like Nora Chipaumire and Opiyo Okach, on the streets as well as in their work routine. On the first conference panel, both artists, with support from a video contribution by theoretician Achille Mmembe, report on their experiences and the expectations brought forth towards a black, postcolonialised body. One performance by Opiyo Okach, who alternately works in West Africa and in France, was criticised as being “not African enough”, as related by Okach, because it did not adhere to the cliché-ridden notion of an African dance piece. This set of problems and the question for identity that goes along with it forms an important aspect in Nora Chipaumire's work. As a New Yorker from Zimbabwe, she deals with the female, African body in dance, as exemplified in her video *Afropromo #1 King Lady*. The dancer and choreographer emphatically speaks out on the behalf of the meaning of the influence that other countries and cultures exert on Western dance: “West, you're tired. You need us, the South. Because we have nothing, we can only dream. We have so much imagination”. Since

pioneers who were influential in their time such as Trisha Brown, Martha Graham and Pina Bausch have died, Western dance is basically dead along with them, only kept moving by this heritage, defying reinvention. Through means of a realised transculturalism, future productions could profit from the merging of different influences and adhere to the zeitgeist. In this context, she indicates a change in thinking by the audience. How do we reach the people outside of an elite intellectual target group and introduce them to cultural institutions and contemporary dance? Nora Chipaumire examines youth culture and its language, even beyond of big urban centres, and appeals to an early cultural education in order to make even small children sensitive to different art forms. Additionally, she demands free admission to all cultural institutions in order to dissolve the financial barrier. The project *Infecting The City* by Jay Pather successfully brings those thoughts to fruition in the form of a public theatre festival on the streets of Cape Town.

Public space as an area for dance and performance sometimes emerges to the focus within the debate. During the “theory” panel under Susan Leigh Foster’s direction, artist Janez Janša brings up the problematic relationships of contemporary performances in a neo-liberal society. The freedom to be, at all times, “at the right spot at the right time”, acting artistically, refuses any provocative possibility. He demands performances and actions that disrupt fundamental structures by means of perceived misplacement in social structures, forcing the systems to react. This efficacy can only be possible outside of a comfort zone, he claims. In the following conversation, choreographer Meg Stuart describes an action she and a number of young people conducted at the Natural History Museum of Vienna, an action that was stopped by the institution itself. After this, the performance relocated to a public fountain, where it was misconstrued as an event by passers-by. Action in public space that does not offer any obstacle might not be able to move anything. “Political power is not inviolable”, emphasises Janez Janša, motivating the attendees to become active in performance and dance as well as to find means to rupture patterns to ensure the development of dance does not just tread water.

Yet, can dance itself already be perceived as a political act? “Dance is my form of political activism. It is not how I dance or why I dance. It is that I dance”, American choreographer and Judson Church legend Debora Hay, who just recently guested in Düsseldorf with a premiere, claims. Public excess already marks the departure from socially accepted norms, while they are permitted within an artistic framework. It remains questionable, though, whether the sheer existence of performance and dance in these politically fraught times achieves any effect. This is not about the legitimacy of dance through political relevance but rather about the course of action that it implies. On the panel *Social Practices and the Inherent Politics of Dance*, those questions exactly come into focus. The choice of certain performers, of music and topics may already be political, as well as the early conceptual stage itself. This also needs to be discussed. What can be viewed as political? Opiyo Okach notices that the African body must not be reduced to its political aspect. Still, it remains important to include marginalised groups in choreographies. Additionally, choreographer Dan Daw, who himself suffers from cerebral palsy, questions the political dimension of his own performance. Is the representation of bodies restricted by disability as well as the representation of bodies beyond generally accepted beauty ideals on a stage a political statement? This is one aspect which tanzhaus nrw staged with the “Real Bodies” series during the current season. The unconventional format and its exterior presence on advert posters were cause for reactions, sometimes outraged.

Xenophobia, prejudice and sexism have become ubiquitous again with the American presidential election and the European refugee problem. Philosopher and performance theoretician Bojana Kunst asserts that the general public has not yet grasped the full extent of postcolonialism, neo-liberalism and racism. One is stunned when confronted with the global situation, incapable to react adequately to these unsettling developments. Should the performing arts take cues from political protest to take a stand for openness and tolerance which define the essence of art? Carolee Scheeman advised the young artist generation to quit the arts in order to become activists. Due to the generally low fees of dancers, they are reliant on private subsidy, which makes it harder to realise social critique in productions. More often than not, supports and institutions are disinclined to finance radical concepts as they are not easily accessible to a classic subscription audience. Fearing financial loss through declining ticket sales and low response, established venues will rarely take a risk and will instead stage compliant, aesthetic pieces.

These circumstances also influence the art schools and dance education. The bearing of private money means a restriction for artistic work beyond the confined safe space of the academy, which cradles the only possibility for creative experiment, it was said. Discrete projects and free artistic unfolding are barely viable when confronted with rising tuition fees. What requirements should be met by art schools today to cater and care for the new generation of witty, innovative creatives and to groom them for the market? That is the question posed by dance theoretician Bojana Cvejić and Susana Tambutti, professor for contemporary dance at the Buenos Aires University, along with their guests Sujata Goel and Laurence Rassel. They are of the opinion that there needs to be support lent to the students for independent organisation as well as for collaborations. Increasing professionalism within the art studies is viewed with criticism. The academic education to become a specialised artist seems to represent the only access into the art world. Yet, there can be no success guarantee granted by the studies, even from renowned universities.

A definition must be reached regarding success, and also, on what markets one aims to act. The conference can only provide limited disclosure on these questions and on the structures of the creative economy. Is a professional perspective following academic graduation only a question of luck, then, and can it be understood that some students get recruited by collectives while still at school whilst others fail to establish themselves, only to re-enter their alma mater when turning thirty to be artistically active, independently of institutions?

In general, the debate makes a point for a more intense collaboration as well as for solidarity between the artists. Also, it was marked, the mutual inspiration of the visual arts and contemporary dance played a relevant role during *Inventur 2*. The new hybrid genre Dance exhibition is currently settling in cultural institutions and houses of great international renown. Anne Teresa de Keersmaecker's company Rosas played in the exhibition halls of the Wiels in Brussels, Maria Hassabi and her dancers showed their live installation *Plastic* at the New York MoMa, while performance artist Anne Imhof currently displays her work *Faust* at the German pavilion of the Venice Biennale. But it is not about a simple transformation into another medium. Institutions need to create space, in a literal and a metaphorical sense, for this kind of movable exhibition. Houses such as the London Tate Modern react to this interdisciplinary exhibition form with the construction of dedicated areas for performative art. The MoMa, too, is also sensitive to the developmental shift from a static to a performing art form, thus installing the new function of its constraints in the conception of dance exhibitions. Ana Janevski, curator at the New York MoMa, thinks the cooperation of different art forms as

well as the incorporation of these diffuse genres form an enormous gain for both institutions and recipients.

To transfer contemporary dance from the theatre stage (from the black box) to exhibition halls (to the white cube) unleashes organisational difficulty. The change of venue also marks a change of framework. The visitors of a dance exhibition do not view the performance during a predetermined slot, they are flexible within the opening hours of the museum. The spatial distance between audience room and stage dissolves, and recipients move freely amid the performers. So, the audience, for a part, turn into performers themselves. It is said that the principle of participation instead of passiveness lends special appeal and liveliness to the concept of the Dance exhibition. The museum space permits conversation, photographs and video recording during the performance, unusual for the black box. What constitutes pleasant freedom for the observer is a major point of disruption for the performer. Maria Hasabi formulates her experiences made during the *Plastic* exhibition at the MoMa in the form of an audio contribution, accompanied by an Instagram picture presentation. She and her performers were treated like objects at times, she told the auditorium, objects that could be commented upon and photographed without respect. The artist criticises the excessive pictorial documentation in the exhibition space as well as the high rate of reproduction of her work in social networks, because this is not representative. Art historian and author Claire Bishop, on the other hand, does not want to moralise technical developments and mediatisation but rather determines them to be new factors that have come to make their increasing influence on the art world felt since the last *Inventur*.

Despite this, our reception flattens the moment and the experience of the exhibition through the “second screen”, unable to take it all in. Maria Hassabi favours an audience that admits a performance in, mentally and temporarily, to appreciate artistic demand and to better understand it. This, she maintained, should not incline artists to shape their works in a more commercial and compliant manner. Janez Janša emphasises that not only artists and institutions, but also the viewer should carry initiative to make the art experience viable.

The Dance exhibition genre challenges museums and exhibition venues, destabilising firm structures by employing uncommon technical, spatial and temporal demands, it was stated. This development takes place less in the arts and more within the institutions which become gradually more dynamic because of the dissolution of static structure and the widening of their possible activities.

The breakup of valid security conditions such as the lights turning off in the exhibition hall forces cultural institutions to discard routine, it was claimed. Claire Bishop encouraged the opening of exhibition spaces for activists in order to play even more controversial formats at such institutions. Only through the renunciation of the norm could new and impactful things be created.

POSTCOLONIALISM/GLOBALISM/CRISIS/POLITICS/EMPOWERMENT – This year's *Inventur*, under the direction of Gabriele Brandstetter, Sigrid Gareis, Martina Hochmuth and Bettina Masuch, located the fundamental problems of the time in its programme, highlighted with insistent key words. Participants' expectations were accordingly high. Yet, in hindsight, the conference could not deliver answers to the pressing questions for explicit action. It rather offered proposals for future projects in interdisciplinary exchange and motivated provocative and daring action beyond the accustomed domain. The international guests in Düsseldorf seemed to agree on one point, despite critical analysis and discussions: One has to become active collectively, as an artistic community, to rethink and distort existing social and institutional structures. Palpable plans for implementation were not mapped out. Final efficiency and effectiveness of the talks cannot yet be measured at this moment. Thus, dance and performance productions in the years to come will shed light on the aftermath and the results of the intense and inspiring *Inventur 2*.

By Pia Bendfeld.