

Faustin Linyekula // CONGO (Kisangani | Lyon)

„Den Kongo, den gibt es nicht. Da ist nur ein Strom und ein großer Wald.“ Der Kongo musste erst erfunden werden – so Éric Vuillard in seiner gleichnamigen Erzählung. Der belgische König Leopold II. will eine Kolonie für sich allein, einen Staat als private Aktiengesellschaft. Nach der Berliner Kongokonferenz 1884 machen sich seine Gouverneure, Kommissare und Vollstrecker an die Arbeit. Der international gefeierte kongolesische Choreograf und Regisseur Faustin Linyekula hat die Erzählung KONGO für sein Stück bearbeitet. Er mischt Worte, Bewegungen und Lieder aus dem Äquatorialwald. In der Theaterarbeit tritt Linyekula als Tänzer auf der Bühne gemeinsam mit dem Schauspieler Kamono Maonda und der Sängerin Pasco Losanganya in einem holzschnittartigen Setting aus Licht und Schatten auf. Die dunkle und wunderschöne Reise gipfelt in der Frage: Wie kann man angesichts der Gräueltaten der Vergangenheit sprechen, tanzen oder auch nur auf den Beinen bleiben?

Der Tänzer und Choreograf **Faustin Linyekula** lebt und arbeitet in Kisangani, im Nordosten der Demokratischen Republik Kongo, ehemals Zaire, ehemals Belgisch Kongo, ehemals Kongo-Freistaat. Nach seinem Literatur- und Theaterstudium in Kisangani zog Linyekula nach Nairobi, wo er 1997 Kenias erste zeitgenössische Tanzkompanie mitbegründete. Nach seiner Rückkehr in den Kongo gründete er in Kinshasa 2001 die Studios Kabako, die sowohl Trainingsprogramme für Tanz und Theater anbieten, als auch Recherchen und Produktionsprozesse unterstützen. Seit 2007 befinden sich die Studios in Kisangani und wurden um die Felder Musik, Film und Video erweitert. Zudem arbeiten sie mit den Communities des Lubungu District an Bildungs- Nachhaltigkeits- und Umweltprojekten. Faustin Linyekulas Theaterarbeiten touren weltweit.

Der 1968 in Lyon, Frankreich, geborene **Éric Vuillard** ist ein französischer Autor und Filmregisseur. Sein zweiter Film MATEO FALCONE (2008) basiert auf einer Geschichte von Prosper Mérimée. Er ist Autor von CONQUISTADORES (2009), das den Ignatius-J. Reilly Preis erhalten hat. Des Weiteren sind seine Bücher LA BATAILLE D'OCCIDENT (DIE BALLADE VOM ABENDLAND), CONGO und TRISTESSE DE LA TERRE (TRAURIGKEIT DER ERDE) mehrfach ausgezeichnet worden. Das im Jahr 2017 erschienene Buch L'ORDRE DU JOUR (DIE TAGESORDNUNG) blickt hinter die Kulissen der politischen und diplomatischen Verhandlungen in Europa zur Zeit des Zweiten Weltkriegs und erhielt den renommierten französischen Prix Goncourt.

Bei SPIELART 2019 war zudem am 25.10. Faustin Linyekulas Stück BANATABA zu sehen.

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CONGO

Faustin Linyekula

My True Country Is My Body

On the award-winning dancer and choreographer Faustin Linyekula, who is funding a water-treatment facility in the Congolese city of Kisangani

by Sean O'Toole // 23th November 2016 // frieze.com/article/my-true-country-my-body

Faustin Linyekula – the Congolese dancer, choreographer and founder of the Kisangani-based collaborative arts platform Studios Kabako – has, over the past five years, been introducing himself in a rote way to new audiences. In 2011, during a stopover at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, he delivered a 'lecture-demonstration' from the open mouth of a large freight elevator. In jeans and a green T-shirt, Linyekula declared: 'My name is Kabako. I am Kabako, once more, Kabako – forever Kabako. My name is Kabako, and I am a storyteller.'

But, who is Kabako? And why does Linyekula – who repeatedly introduces himself in this way – define himself as a storyteller rather than a dancer, which is the principal basis of his acclaim? I'll start by answering the second question. Linyekula's earliest ambition was to be a poet, but the Democratic Republic of the Congo's cataclysmic disassembly over the second half of the 20th century – a tragedy that enfolded him and everyone he knew – cast a doleful light on his aspirations. 'How can I dream of poetry in my pile of ruins?' he asked his Minneapolis audience. So, he danced.

Given the 42-year-old's international success as a dancer, the fact he didn't become a poet might read like a sidebar note. But this thwarted ambition, or at least the circumstances that caused it, is key to understanding this prolific artist, who has been a fixture of dance festivals in Avignon, Brussels and Johannesburg since the early 2000s and who has performed with his malleable company at London's Dance Umbrella and The Kitchen in New York. Linyekula's singular vision has been widely affirmed. In 2012, working with the Ballet de Lorraine, he staged an adaptation of *La Création du Monde* (The Creation of the World, 1923) – a 'negro-cubist fantasy' composed by Darius Milhaud to a libretto by Blaise Cendrars, which was inspired by African folk mythology and originally featured set designs by Fernand Léger – at Théâtre de la Ville in Paris. In 2007, he received the principal award of the Prince Claus Fund and, in 2014, he won the Curry Stone Design Prize for his ongoing infrastructural interventions in his hometown, Kisangani – the third largest city in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

But I still haven't answered that important first question: who is Kabako? When Linyekula introduces himself as such, he is playing a character from his solo dance piece *Le Cargo* (The Cargo, 2011), a biographical work exploring the impact of Congo's collective history on his sinuous body. In stage versions, the piece features Linyekula spasmodically dancing in a circle of spotlights between soliloquizing. As well as having been performed at numerous dance festivals, *Le Cargo* forms part of the programme for the Lisbon-based biennial 'Artista na Cidade' (Artist in the City), for which Linyekula was invited to make a series of citywide interventions over the course of this year. (He follows in the footsteps of acclaimed Belgian choreographer Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, who inaugurated the award in 2012.)

Linyekula is quite possibly the most important artist working on the African continent today. That's a lot of hyperbole to blow in the direction of one man, but there is an ethical imperative to this statement. Writing in the foreword of *Art and Revolution* – his overlooked 1969 study of the Russian artist Ernst Neizvestny – John Berger offers that criticism is always 'a form of intervention'. In most cases, he rightly admits, 'very little depends upon this'. But, occasionally, an interventionist criticism can address something fundamental, a set of 'circumstances' as Berger puts it. Linyekula's description of his hometown as a 'pile of ruins' is no exaggeration. The city was the model for V.S. Naipaul's pessimistic reading of postcolonial Africa in his novel *A Bend in the River* (1979). 'Kisangani is renowned for its recurrent crises,' writes the cultural anthropologist and historian Jean Omasombo in *Urban Africa* (2005), a collection of essays looking at how provisionality, contingency, precarity and human endurance are shaping new urban cultures across Africa. 'Since Congo gained independence in June 1960, the town has been scourged by various violent upheavals that seriously threatened its existence and the precarious livelihoods of its inhabitants, struggling to cope with the prevailing joblessness and the collapse of local capitalism.'¹

The rehabilitation in 2009 of the Kisangani-Beni road has helped re-open the city but it remains dysfunctional. It is still a struggle to find clean, potable water. In January this year, Linyekula purchased land in Kisangani with a view to building a water-treatment facility and neighbourhood cultural centre offering courses in film and sound. The school, which will function as a satellite of Studios Kabako's existing stage and rehearsal space, will plug a definite gap. The local French Cultural Centre has long served as a sort of proxy arts school in Kisangani. As it is, Congo's only formal arts school, the conservative National Institute of the Arts, is in Kinshasa, a 1,720km boat ride down the Congo River. In the lead-up to construction, scheduled to start this month, Studios Kabako is facilitating a series of public meetings with students, artists and women who collect water to explain the project and gather advice on the basics of water supply and expectations regarding the cultural centre.

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Linyekula initially planned to use some of the windfall from his international successes to build a fully fledged art school. The bare circumstances of Kisangani, however, prompted him to focus on more basic infrastructural needs. There is a relationship between this social landscaping and Linyekula's practice as a dancer and choreographer. His work is fundamentally about the complications of subjectivity and the obligations of citizenship in a collapsed political order where remedy, however small, lies in collective action. 'I don't see the future changing with the current structure of the predatory state,' Linyekula told me during a public interview at a Goethe Institute symposium, 'African Futures', which was held in Johannesburg in late 2015. 'I know the state will never help us, but their capacity of nuisance is so big that they can stop any project. In such a context, I cannot say: "Fuck the state!" That will be signing up for the end of everything, including my own life.' His solution has been to activate small 'spaces of resistance', as he calls them. 'My response is not political, in that it's not programmatic,' he stated in a 2005 interview with the online magazine *Ballet-Dance*.

Since returning to Kisangani in 2006, Linyekula's work with Studios Kabako – particularly in creating a functioning arts centre equipped with a stage, rehearsal space, recording studios and accommodation for visiting guest artists – has lent his activities a more programmatic quality. But dance remains at the centre of all this, as he emphasized in his *Ballet-Dance* interview. 'I work with choreographic movement, energy, rhythm, the body and its physical presence – the challenge to remain standing, vertical in spite of a crushing environment. I am showing the individual in a context where there is no space for individuals.' He added: 'My only true country is my body.'

Dance is possibly a vague term to characterize what Linyekula does. His practice, he said in a 2011 talk in Johannesburg, also at the Goethe Institute, 'is about asking questions to the body'. He beat his chest while saying this. 'Dance is my attempt to remember my name.' Born into a Catholic family in Ubundu, a town upstream from Kisangani, Linyekula has developed a practice that can, in one sense, be read as an investigation into his physicality. In another sense, however, it can be understood as the means through which he explores his writerly ambitions. His choreography repeatedly invokes the potential of spoken and written language. His all-male ensemble piece, *more, more, more ... future* (2009), includes projections of writings by his childhood friend, poet and playwright Antoine Vumilia Muhindo. (Imprisoned for allegedly aiding in the 2001 assassination of former Congolese president Laurent-Désiré Kabila, Vumilia Muhindo escaped a decade later and now lives in exile in Sweden.) The production, which has toured widely, features Linyekula and his fellow dancers, Dinozord and Papy Ebotani, inhabiting billowing costumes produced by Malian designer Lamine Kouyaté, of the cult Paris fashion label Xuly.Bët. It is a brilliantly shambolic piece of agit-prop theatre, which marries contemporary dance and Congolese pop music. Flamme Kapaya, the flamboyantly brilliant guitar soloist, is a key collaborator on this work, as well as *Le Cargo*. Although mournful, *more, more, more ... future* is ultimately celebratory, an energetic counter-response to Congo's 'threnody of mass death', to quote American theatre director Peter Sellars, a regular interlocutor with Linyekula, on the country's predicament.

As should be apparent, Linyekula draws on diverse sources – autobiography, social history, popular music, the dandified urban rituals of Congo's battered yet somehow fluorescent metropolitan culture – to construct his works. This lack of containment sees his creativity spill across genres and can make his work hard to read. The dancer Ariel Osterweis, writing in a 2010 edition of *Dance Research Journal*, says Linyekula's productions possess a 'bricolage materiality'.² She offered this as praise, but it can also be read as a criticism. In his elevator performance in Minneapolis in 2011, Linyekula declared as much: 'My work is spoken of as dance, theatre, music, noise, agitation, whatever. What do I know? Most of the time I feel like someone who has escaped some catastrophe and whose heritage is a pile of ruins.'

Linyekula routinely invokes ruins, both in conversations and in his stage design. 'The greatest heritage that my generation got from our fathers was a pile of ruins,' he said during a public conversation with Sellars in the Royal Flemish Theatre of Brussels in 2014. 'But these are not only physical ruins, they are also ruins in our hearts and our heads.' Congo's ruins are both material and mental: the enduring dereliction of the Hotel des Chutes on the shores of the Congo River and, for Linyekula, the memory of his childhood friend Richard Kabako.

After finishing his schooling at the Catholic-run Collège du Sacré-Coeur in Kisangani, Linyekula informally studied theatre at the local French Cultural Centre before enrolling in literature and theatre studies at the state-run University of Kisangani. This was during the early 1990s: a period of growing political resistance to the autocratic rule of Mobutu Sese Seko accompanied by economic immiseration. In 1993, Linyekula decamped to Kenya to continue his studies. A year later, Kabako also left Kisangani, but his story ended dismally: he died of bubonic plague near the border of Uganda. A villager eventually buried him under a coffee tree. Kabako's story, while unique, is also allegorical. It tells a familiar tale of dissolution and flight, of hope met by oblivion and an unmarked grave. It is a story that exceeds Congo, a story that is replayed almost daily in failed passages across the Mediterranean. But, in Congo, Kabako's unceremonious burial invokes the memory of Patrice Lumumba, the country's short-lived, first democratically elected president whose assassination in 1961 was followed by burials, exhumations and the eventual disappearance of his body.

One of Linyekula's earliest works to disinter the memory of Kabako is the ensemble piece, *Dinozord: The Dialogue Series III* (2006). The title is a reference to both the hybrid Power Rangers machines (1993 ongoing) and the hip-hop dancer and rapper Dinozord, an associate artist of Studios Kabako. Presented at the 2007 Avignon Festival, an important staging-post for contemporary performance, the production included videography by artist Sammy Baloji, excerpts of Mozart sung by countertenor Serge Kakudji, and Linyekula dancing with Dinozord, Ebotani and Djodjo Kazadi. It also included texts written by Kabako himself. The production, which offers a Beckettian ruined landscape as scenography, was revived in 2012 under the new title *Sur les traces de Dinozord* (Under the Traces of Dinozord) and was performed again in Lisbon in June this year.

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During a lull in a 2015 performance of *Le Cargo* at the Institute for Theatrical Arts in the Emirati city of Sharjah, Linyekula wondered about the function of his contorted dancing and elliptical storytelling. 'Has it made any difference at all, and for whom? Did it make a difference for my friend Kabako that I told his story, the story of man who died [...] of a disease that [...] I thought only existed in books?' This sort of relentless questioning and self-doubt is typical of Linyekula. But his practice is not solely about building a monument to a lost friend. He is increasingly turning from Congo's haunted past, a subject central to early dance pieces such as *Spectacularly Empty II* (2003), to a more future-oriented practice that melds creative and social concerns.

His move back to Kisangani was an important part of this process. After eight years in exile, mostly in Nairobi but also in London, where he worked in theatre, Linyekula returned to Congo in 2001. He initially settled in Kinshasa, but the capital's sprawl and agitation proved unworkable. Kisangani, he told a Johannesburg audience in 2011, allowed him to better pursue his ambitions, which are larger than a theatrical stage or city block: he wants to make an impact across an entire city.

'The work we develop in the Congo is constantly trying to find ways of being in dialogue with the city at large,' Linyekula told an interviewer from the Pew Center for Arts &

Heritage, a grant organization that facilitated his visit earlier this year to the Painted Bride Art Center in Philadelphia. As part of the trip, he performed in an abandoned warehouse in the city's north, colloquially known as the 'Philadelphia Badlands'. This kind of cultural acupuncture in fraught urban neighbourhoods – temporal incursions that are now standard features of many cultural projects globally – has its limitations, certainly in terms of real effects, but what interests me is the locus of his incursion. 'There is something deeply urban about the work of Linyekula,' wrote Belgian author David van Reybrouck in a 2006 catalogue essay for the New Crowned Hope Festival, organized by Sellars in Vienna. Van Reybrouck, whose books include *Congo: The Epic History of a People* (2010), links Studios Kabako's practices to the 'radical urbanization' taking place in Southeast Asia, South America and sub-Saharan Africa.

This urbanization is the source of new patterns of usage and urban methodologies, some of which are discussed in AbdouMaliq Simone's invigorated writing about postcolonial African cities. In a 2004 essay on Johannesburg in the US journal *Public Culture*, Simone remarked on the 'incessantly flexible, mobile and provisional intersections of residents' and how these hook-ups were the source of 'innumerable possibilities of combination and interchange that preclude any definitive judgment of efficacy or impossibility'.³ It is a useful description, not only in thinking about Linyekula's long-term project in Kisangani, but also of the Tijuana-based ToroLab, which was established by Raúl Cárdenas Osuna in 1995, and the Dorchester Projects initiated in 2009 by Theaster Gates on Chicago's South Side. Gates's progressive transformation of a cluster of formerly abandoned buildings in an impoverished Chicago neighbourhood, using upscaled materials, is well-documented and highlights the agency of culture and collectivism in rehabilitating a broken community. ToroLab is an older initiative. Equal parts artists' collective and social-design facilitator, its projects have included social landscaping and food-growing schemes in Tijuana, as well as a fashion line (Toro Vestimenta) that addresses the needs of the area's migratory population. ToroLab's interdisciplinary practice and performative investigative process, writes curator Nato Thompson in *Art and Social Justice Education* (2012), 'treads a fine line between aesthetic and political research'.⁴

Actually, I believe it wilfully breaches that line. I watched Cárdenas Osuna animatedly address a group of city bureaucrats outside Johannesburg in 2013 – not an unusual forum for him. 'The time for protest has ended; the time for proposal has begun,' he told the *Los Angeles Times* in 2001. Cárdenas Osuna's statement offers a pithy summary of Linyekula's current methods: a can-do approach founded on self renewal rather than social responsibility. 'I never set out on a mission to change Congo,' Linyekula told Sellars two years ago in Brussels. 'It was realizing my own personal necessities. If you want to make it possible to live and work [in Congo], you have to build something.' A water treatment facility, a theatrical stage, a recording studio: infrastructures that shift the emphasis from isolation, loss and ruin to community, possibility and fragile opportunity.

Faustin Linyekula lives in Kisangani, the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In 2001, he founded the collective Studios Kabako in Kisangani, which will launch a new neighbourhood cultural centre and water-treatment unit in 2017. Having been selected as the 2016 'Artista na Cidade' (Artist in the City) for Lisbon, Portugal, Linyekula will be performing at various venues throughout the city in November.