

The Bluff of Contemporary Dance

MONIKA GINTERSDORFER in conversation with GABRIELE KLEIN

GABRIELE KLEIN: Today, on April 7, 2011, the Ivorian president Laurent Gbagbo barricaded himself in the bunker under his residency in Abidjan. He insists on his right to presidency although he has been voted out of office and he is fighting against the elected president Ouattara and the Ivorian people. You have many close contacts with the Ivory Coast and work a lot with Ivorian dancers ...

MONIKA GINTERSDORFER: Yes, it is interesting to see how we already anticipated the current political situation in a piece that we developed a year ago with Franck Edmond Yao. In this production, he dances the role of a typical nightclub-goer fighting for space in front of the mirror in a disco. “It is all about defending one’s place. It doesn’t matter what for. This place is my place and that is exactly how it is in politics” says Frank E. Yao and attempts to take up as much space as possible by moving his arms and legs, kicking and beating the floor. In the piece, he directly shifts over from narcissistic clubber to a western scene in which two political rivals stand facing each other just like Gbagbo himself formulated it in foresight. In a combination of movements and text – a style, which has now become typical for our work – theories become physical reality and the physical turns back into language.

GABRIELE KLEIN: You are a theater director, who also develops choreographic pieces with dancers, such as the *Logobi* series¹.

1 *Logobi 01* (2009, with: Gotta Depri, Hauke Heumann), *Logobi 02* (2009, with: Gotta Depri, Gudrun Lange), *Logobi 03* (2009, with: Laurent Chétouane, Franck Edmond Yao), *Logobi 04* (2009, with: Jochen Roller, Franck Edmond Yao), *Logobi 05*

MONIKA GINTERSDORFER: I know nothing about contemporary dance nor have I ever claimed that my work is about dance. We² created the *Logobi* series, because I had been working with dancers from the Ivory Coast for years, but I did so as a theater director. The working principle behind *Logobi* is no more specifically dance-oriented than in our other creations, where we also already worked with movement. They are however always about the relationship of language and movement. If I weren't able to work with language, I would be lost in working with movement. In other words, yes, I use dance elements, but I only do so in order to accomplish other things and not as a reflection of dance itself. Ultimately, I've always exploited movement in order to make theater.

GABRIELE KLEIN: How did the *Logobi* series begin?

MONIKA GINTERSDORFER: Gotta Depri, a dancer from the Ivory Coast, who I've known for a very long time, said he'd like to live in Hamburg. But there's no dance scene for him here, nobody knows him and as an Ivorian dancer with a different dance culture, he's marginalized. He received his training in traditional dance and in the contemporary urban dances of the Ivory Coast. In *Logobi 01*, he shows what he has danced so far. In contrast to European dances, which we appreciate abstractly, the dances from the Ivory Coast are readable for all, just not for a European audience. This is also why we explain the movements during the dancing. It was a research project for Gotta Depri, Franck Edmond Yao and myself, because for all of us – them as African dancers and myself as a theater director – European dance or what is here commonly considered contemporary dance, for example in respect to technique, is something we are not familiar with.

GABRIELE KLEIN: What does *Logobi* mean?

(2010/11, with: Richard Siegal or Paula Schez, Franck Edmond Yao), directed by: Gintersdorfer/Klaßen

- 2 Theater director Monika Gintersdorfer, Ivorian dancer Franck Edmond Yao and visual artist Knut Klaßen began working together in 2005. With a German-African team of performers, they have produced pieces in independent venues and theaters, in galleries and museums, as well as in the public sphere in the field of theater, dance and performance. They have participated with their work in festivals in Abidjan, Ivory Coast and in Europe and received numerous prizes, e.g. Impulse Prize of the Jury 2009, George Tabori Prize 2010, Dance Company of the Year 2010, Faust Prize for Richard Siegal in *Logobi 05* 2010.

MONIKA GINTERSDORFER: *Logobi* is the name of an urban dance form, a street dance from the Ivory Coast. Initially, it was primarily danced by very muscular men: doormen, bouncers, tough guys. Then the dance became sleeker, more elegant, no longer so male-aggressive. It became a dance that anyone can dance, a woman, a little girl. Nowadays everyone dances *Logobi*.

GABRIELE KLEIN: Does *Logobi* have a special dance technique?

MONIKA GINTERSDORFER: *Logobi* has a canon of movements. The movements are actually quite provocative. They say: look at me. I am a strong, handsome guy and perhaps I'll be a real star some day. If you want, come compete with me. But you may get your ass kicked.

GABRIELE KLEIN: It sounds similar to the battle culture of hip hop.

MONIKA GINTERSDORFER: Yes, *Logobi* is glamorous and a very gestural dance. The movements are meant to tell stories, imitate language. Unlike hip hop, *Logobi* is also a very beautiful and sleek dance and not necessarily purely about confrontation. *Zigui* was more aggressive. There were even cases, in which it caused other dancers to leave the dance floor. But anyone can dance *Logobi* and people often dance it in front of the mirror. It is a kind of self-reflection that serves as a form of self-confirmation. *Logobi* is not really a dance, danced with a partner. Everyone dances in row facing the mirror. So you have to fight for a good place in front of the mirror and then defend this spot.

GABRIELE KLEIN: Where do they dance *Logobi* in the Ivory Coast?

MONIKA GINTERSDORFER: In clubs, discos. Abidjan is the economic capital. That is where most people live. That is also where most of the new urban dances are created and where all the important clubs are. New trends spill outwards from there over into the countryside or into the smaller cities. Urban dances also serve to immediately translate current events. At the moment, for example, there is a curfew and as soon as they can, everyone crowds into the clubs. You will find all ethnicities gathered together in the clubs. Ethnic differences aren't as important there. The only thing that counts is style.

GABRIELE KLEIN: Is *Logobi* also a dance spread with the help of visual media, as e.g. in the case of *b-boying* or *video clip dancing*?

MONIKA GINTERSDORFER: *Logobi* first and foremost developed in the streets. Meanwhile, there are a lot of video clips about *Logobi*, but in the beginning, it was purely street and club performance culture.

GABRIELE KLEIN: How and where did you develop an interest in dance?

MONIKA GINTERSDORFER: I first encountered *Logobi*, when I was commissioned to film a *Coupé Décalé*³-Show in Hamburg. As a performance, I found this system to be very strong: to call out certain words and immediately perform them. In the process, the sequence of the texts produced new meaning, a non-narrative content. It was very crazy craziness and to a large degree contained much freedom: to constantly re-formulate new combinations and to design a kind of reality through performance, which provides the performer with status as subject. In Abidjan, club dance is not just amusement. Instead, the participants take what they have created in the performance into their everyday lives and thus transform accordingly. *Coupé Décalé* was created by the group *Jet Set*⁴. I filmed several of

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- 3 Douk Saga (1975-2006), called the 'President', Lino Versace, Solo Béton, Boro Sanguy and the other members of the self-proclaimed *Jet Set* created *Coupé Décalé* in 2003 in the milieu of the Ivorian diaspora in Paris. Developed in a period of crisis and impoverishment in the Ivory Coast, *Coupé Décalé* provides space for a parallel world between Paris and Abidjan, which allows individual existences to become expressions of an assertive play with codes and clichés in a mixture of subversive self-affirmation, dandyism and glamour. With breathtaking speed, this music, dance and lifestyle genre soon spread through the clubs of Abidjan to then become a massive success in West and Central Africa, the Caribbean and Europe. *Coupé Décalé* reached such popularity that Douk Saga's funeral even took on the form of a real ceremony of state for a true president of Abidjan. *Coupé* is street slang in Abidjan for 'doing mischief or being drunk'. In the Parisian reality of the Ivorians, the term transformed its meaning into 'to cheat, to bluff, to make a cut', followed by *décalé* and *travaillé*, running away and working. However, this modern term for working actually means declaring a hedonistic lifestyle with expensive cars, brand-name clothes, champagne and Cuban cigars and the earning and spending of a fast buck out of hand to be a true profession.
- 4 The *Jet Set* combine artistic expertise and glamour with precarious living conditions, problems with the law and money, in other words common everyday life as experienced by those migrants living in the banlieues of Paris. As self-proclaimed stars, they keep their battles with the police, the courts and their fluctuation of solvency as invisible as possible, while asserting the status of fame, glamour and wealth. Theatrical presentation, exclusive designer fashion and the creation of ever-

their performances. These performances are not about embodying certain roles and contrasting them with mundane everyday life. On the contrary, the performers give themselves names such as 'Le President', 'Le Bankier', without associating these roles with specific gestures, facial expressions or movements. But they are always and everywhere 'Le President' and everyone call them by that name. In this respect something created in the performance, which has an effect on life itself. From this perspective, life itself a performance: we perform what we want to be.

GABRIELE KLEIN: How did you translate that into a theatrical concept?

MONIKA GINTERSDORFER: We used the system that these shows have, combining text with movement, but without the music, which normally also plays a part. We formed teams in which dancers worked with actors. The language had to be translated, German-French and French-English. Initially, we chose simple movements loosely connected to what is being said. The movements could be dance movements or more athletic or look like working motions. At first, the movements were there in order to create something similar to a group identity: one person does a movement, which the others can immediately join in on. And we kept it so simple, because we wanted to keep audience inhibition as low as possible, when we were performing outside. We performed in places, such as the banlieues of Paris, where the audience has a lot of knowledge about and experience with movement. The audience was the experts and we wanted to integrate them.

GABRIELE KLEIN: What role does the audience play?

MONIKA GINTERSDORFER: For us, it's not about: here are the artists and superstars and you can just sit and watch. We do not build stages when we play in the streets in order to stand level with the audience. Eye to eye and not elevated. As a performer, this makes you very vulnerable. The audience reaches out to touch

new dance forms are indispensable elements of this concept. In accordance with the principles of reevaluation and exaggeration, a parallel society is created. The members of this society meet in the suburbs of Paris, in the Ritz, the Atlantis or along the Rue Princess, the party strip of Abidjan the *Jet Set* sets the stage, not vice versa. In the clubs, DJs sing stories of a Jet-Set world, in which the migrants occupy the higher positions, become bankers, ambassadors or presidents. The political mixes with irony, amusement and show.

you, push you. By making the movements simple, anyone can immediately join in. If you are talking while you are dancing, you have to think and formulate at the same time as well. And when you take a pause from speaking and the movement continues, it's no problem at all.

GABRIELE KLEIN: What kind of texts did you use?

MONIKA GINTERSDORFER: One of our first pieces was *Verlieren (Losing)* (2006). *Verlieren* was a mix of outdoor performances. We went out onto the streets and visited Ivorian artists in their homes in Paris, Marseille and Hamburg. These were, in other words, people who also had the status of migrants. This double life as artists and migrants of color is something we wanted to make visible in the performances and in a film.

We also showed it in La Courneuve, which is the banlieue in Paris, where journalists made those pictures of burning cars that went around the world. It was also a period of intensified conflict between France and the Ivory Coast, a conflict, which also greatly changed the lives of Ivorians in France. The texts that we used also referred to the political situation of the migrants.

The performances featured, for example, DJ Arafat, Maga Din Din or Zike, as well as people, who are well-known in show business and nevertheless still live in the banlieues. We developed scenes with them and filmed them in their apartments. So actually it was more like 10 to 12 people, who performed in the film.

GABRIELE KLEIN: What is your typical working process, for example, in *Logobi*?

MONIKA GINTERSDORFER: *Logobi 01* was about the situation of Gotta Depri. And from *Logobi 02* onwards, we asked people, who are not part of our team, to collaborate for a short space of time. We didn't want to rehearse *Logobi* longer than a week.

GABRIELE KLEIN: Why?

MONIKA GINTERSDORFER: First of all, Ivorian dancers work rather quickly. They don't want to repeat and rehash what they are doing for 4 weeks. And we don't want anyone to act as if they are watching something that they have already seen 10 times before. Ideally, they should watch as attentively as if they were seeing it for the first or second time. In *Logobi 04*, we worked with Jochen Roller, in

Logobi 05 with Richard Siegal – in order to have any chance at working with these very busy dancers, you have to keep the rehearsal periods short.

GABRIELE KLEIN: How would you describe the work on *Logobi 04* with Jochen Roller, for example? What was your role as director therein?

MONIKA GINTERSDORFER: The dancers, Jochen and Franck, and I spoke with each other, even before entering the rehearsal space. We also showed each other things. It was a constant back and forth – a system of demonstration – from talking to performing to talking, from table to stage to table. Later, I disappeared from the stage. Because I've known Franck Edmond and Gotta Depri for so long and also actually know Ivorian dance pretty well by now, I can easily say which movements are interesting to present.

GABRIELE KLEIN: And then there's the moment of choreographic decision-making. Who makes them and which decisions?

MONIKA GINTERSDORFER: It depends. *Logobi 01*, *02* and *04* have a fixed order, i.e. I select the order of the performance out of the material that was created over a period of 5 days. For example: we begin with the funeral dance, then do the rain dance and from this, we move on to the first urban dance. In *Logobi*, it is up to the performers whether something is fixed or not. In *Logobi 05* with Richard Siegal, nothing is fixed, absolutely nothing. Richard didn't want to provoke any form of repetition.

GABRIELE KLEIN: Neither did you, right?

MONIKA GINTERSDORFER: Yes. In *Logobi 05*, I wrote a list during rehearsals. Half an hour before the performance I went to Richard and said to him: if you could get to this point sometime during the performance – that would be nice. And he said: Monica, you told me, you don't like repetition. And I said, yes, but that was really very good and then I threw away my list. In other words, in *Logobi 05*, our goal is to never repeat anything and the structure between the two dancers has to be found anew every evening. *Logobi 05* therefore has very different performances. When I send out a DVD, it's never clear whether the presenter will really get the performance that's on it.

GABRIELE KLEIN: I see a difference: *Logobi 01* and *02* seem to be more about representation and *Logobi 05* more about the performative. From this perspective: Is *Logobi 01* more a piece and *Logobi 05* more a process?

MONIKA GINTERSDORFER: The method is the same. The way we approach rehearsals and ask questions: why could such a movement be successful? Or why would such a movement be accepted in one cultural system and not in another? In *Logobi 01* and *02*, we explored Gotta Depri's question of whether contemporary dance is no more than a bluff.

GABRIELE KLEIN: Is this a politically, a post-colonially motivated question?

MONIKA GINTERSDORFER: In my opinion, it is not particularly political to make politics an issue. It is political, when you try to change the personal circumstances of people through your work. We did *Logobi*, for example, because Franck and Gotta Depri had no contact yet with the European dance scene. To get to know contemporary dance, or what the Europeans define as such, by performing and not by reading books or watching films. Through and in performance, real change takes place. Before the performances, they were dancers, who performed in Europe in a specific dance milieu, which had no connections whatsoever to the European dance scene. I wanted to lift this separation between their dance community and European dance. That is why I did *Logobi*. And things have changed as a result. Richard Siegal has invited Franck to take part in his next piece, for example. *Logobi 05* was invited to the German Dance Platform 2010 and Franck and Gotta Depri are now dancers in the contemporary dance context.

GABRIELE KLEIN: It changes the circumstances of individual lives.

MONIKA GINTERSDORFER: Yes, it is always quite concrete. In our collaborations with African dancers, it is always also about visas, about receiving permission to move. Until 2009, I invited the dancers at my own risk and with a lot of administrative expenses. That was not without problems, for if one of them had not gone back, I would never have been allowed to invite anyone ever again. Later, I received support from institutions such as the House of World Cultures in Berlin. They organized the invitations and also assumed responsibility and liability. That was a relief, but much has changed due to the current political situation. Our work is currently about providing support for people in the Ivory Coast and

trying to get them out of a country on the verge of a civil war. That is currently our main project.

GABRIELE KLEIN: We can differentiate here between three concepts of interculturalism. The first concept pursues an early modernist idea of dance, which says: dance is a universal language. You can see this in ballet: ballet is a European, courtly, i.e. class-specific dance culture, which follows a certain concept of gender and translates feudal structures of power into choreography. Ballet today is a globalized language, disseminated worldwide through colonialization and imperialism, among other things. As a globalized language, ballet disseminates, one could say, the post-colonial myth that anyone can understand dance and choreography, that anyone can read it. This concept of dance as a universal language is something you clearly did not choose. The second concept is that of cultural difference. That dance can be understood as a cultural technique and that its identity is located in a specific culture. Inter-culturalism here means: accepting the 'Other', striving towards an understanding between cultures. The third concept is the deconstructivist idea of constant cultural translation. Here there is no source or target culture; dance cultures are always 'in between', interstitial, on a journey.

MONIKA GINTERSDORFER: Yes, the last one interests us a lot at the moment. The first *Logobis* were about cultural differences and about making these recognizable. *Logobi 05* was about the transformation of movements. Here cultural identities were more than just starting points, transcultural formations were the process. Whether transformation can take place or not, also depends on the dancers and their dance biographies. Some move more intensely in a system, have a distinct identity.

GABRIELE KLEIN: Transcending cultural identities is quite an ambivalent process ...

MONIKA GINTERSDORFER: For an Ivorian dancer, that which emerges from this 'in-between' space is extremely dangerous. There is the danger of *n'importe quoi* – of no longer being able to recognize anything at all. That it no longer stands for and doesn't relate to anything. In the Ivory Coast, every dance has to have its own name. If someone just simply does something, they are accused of *n'importe quoi*. Just doing something or another, producing a bastard. It was therefore clear that the principle of transformation had to be distinct. How do we manage to not create a *n'importe quoi* in the process of transformation?

