

**ARTISTIC IDENTITIES IN A WORLD OF INFLUENCE AND
INTERNATIONAL ARTISTIC EXCHANGE.**

*A Special Report to the IETM, Brussels' Nairobi Satellite on the Nairobi Dance
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By

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1.1 INTRODUCTION

In a rapidly globalising world such concepts as genre are in continuous flux; identities are blurring and the idea of owners and originators of specific art forms, curators and performance styles is becoming increasingly difficult to place. Yet it is human nature, since time immemorial, to attempt to name things, put them in boxes that they can manage- or maybe easily ignore- and generally come up with working definitions of all ideas emergent or extant.

Yet the idea of definitions in a world of influence and international artistic exchange; in an age of fusion between that which is deemed traditional with the modern; in a time where cross cultural exchange and integration is the catch phrase becomes problematic. The 'manageable boxes' with their all encompassing tags of 'contemporary', 'neo', 'urban', 'afro', et cetera continuously refuse to hold all for the divergent art forms that we chose to conveniently view as one as these art forms struggle for recognition as unique types and genres.

It is under this broad theme of 'identity' that the Nairobi Dance Encounters were held at the Godown Arts' Centre on the 23rd – 25th October, 2006. The meeting was organised around three working groups, integrated into the general program, with each starting with an opening speech followed by debate animated by the forum moderator. Since this was largely an informal and interactive session, rather than a presentation, ideas flowed freely and the discussions were stretched to the limit, it becomes difficult- even unnecessary- to attempt to attribute every singular idea to an individual. Therefore, for purposes of this report, we will concentrate on ideas raised and not on personalities.

2.0 IS CONTEMPORARY ART A WESTERN CONCEPT?

Moderator: Nayse Lopez, Critic and Programmer, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

Is contemporary art a western concept? “Yes if we buy it!” argued Nayse Lopez. The definition of contemporary art is the brainchild of critics not resident in the geo-political south or whose background and training is in western thought. By allowing others to define our work, we tend to steer it towards fitting within those definitions rather than pursuing our own instinctive and spontaneous creative paths.

It is also clearly evident that markets are a huge determinant of what styles and genres thrive and which ones fail. This is because the market has the patronage- both material and moral requisite for sustaining theatre companies, dance troupes and exhibitions. That the market for contemporary art exists predominantly in the west means that the practitioners of such art forms must tailor their repertoires to suit the tastes of these audiences. This naturally flies in the face of creative licence as the consumer rather than the creator defines the work to be presented.

Further to this, because the general market for contemporary art is in the west the agenda for what travels by virtue of being representative of genre becomes political. In this case cultural representatives from the west such the British Council and the French Cultural Centre underwrite the travel and performances of such theatre, music and dance troupes as they deem to be representative of a certain genre. In truth though, the idea of these groups being representative exists only because the financial backers and promoters i.e. cultural attachés say so. In most cases, these groups might or might not have a divergent name and expression for their art but that has to be changed to suit within the framework that their handlers desire. The end result is most likely superficial creations that mimic the stereotypes of the genres to which they are affixed.

The issue of definition of an art form then becomes central to the existence of its own unique identity yet this tendency to define our art ourselves is lacking. To begin with we

must be able to produce knowledge about art. We have to create functional links with academic institutions that will allow for the production of a discernible discourse and a framework for constructive criticism that is relevant to our art forms and that does not merely attempt to translate western thought to critic our art.

Moreover, as Ms. Lopez said, “When you name things, you have power over them.” When such tags as “contemporary African Dance’ are imposed on us by western critics, they immediately acquire control over our art. This is because what they call Contemporary African Dance exists in their minds and not ours. As a result, if we accept that definition we get caught up in a struggle for conformity to a standard that we not only cannot rationalise, but whose scope we do not know. Thus the definition becomes a box within which our art has to fit in to stay relevant and yet we do not know the size and or limitations of the box.

In summation, the overriding thought of this working group was that in a continent of thousands of diverse cultural identities and millions of unique souls, the definition “Contemporary African Dance” is a mere filter. It is a blanket term that allows others to talk about our art without being bothered by the varied, distinctive ways in which we express it. Such definitions allow western critics to move us out of the realm of art where we can be judged on the basis of such universal parameters as are applied to western practitioners into the pigeonhole of “African” which they can condescend to.

2.1 CULTURAL IDENTITIES: MARKERS AND SPECIFICITIES

Moderator: Tang Fu Kuen, Producer, Bangkok, Thailand

Mr. Kuen speaking on the cultural preconceptions that define identities opened with what was easily the most atrocious statement of the conference maybe because it seemed to echo the North’s jaundiced view of the thought processes of Southern Culture and

tradition: Cultural historians have linked modernity via rationalisation... (Yet)... other cultures (from the South?) have a non-knowledge that doesn't fall under rational tendencies.

That faux pas notwithstanding, Mr. Kuen led the participants on an exploration of what it means to be an artiste from the South and the markers of this identity. Once again the need to generate discourse on the work artistes do was raised. The rationale of generating that discourse ourselves is that someone else will attach a certain discourse to your work unless you do it yourself. It would be more creatively valid that we work within the definitions of cultural and artistic identities that we formulate rather than grappling with other people's conceptions of us which would inhibit our creativity and sense of self.

It was noted that structures needed for the acquisition of skills and or consequently the formulation of a peculiar discourse on the art forms in the South were non-existent. Basically there exists disconnect between the theory of and the practice of art in the Global South. Further to this and maybe as a result of it, it was argued that audiences from this part of the world do not have sufficient knowledge to appreciate aesthetics. That statement finds validation in the assertion that dance is not a universal language; by virtue of the fact that dance is highly codified, to be appreciated, it takes an increasingly aware audience that can translate the visual images into correlating mental pictures.

Beyond the pre-existing social cultural sensibilities was the question of political dispensation. Art as Mr. Kuen would have it is political and politics is art. The practice of contemporary art in the Global South has been in an environment non-conducive to the sustenance of art discourse. Because of its ability to shape opinion, critic social ills and influence the public, art is constantly viewed by the political elite as a threat to their survival. In the end to them it becomes an issue of letting art thrive in a controlled environment which stunts its creative nature or killing it. Killing it becomes the easier and preferred option.

This working group, thus, in reiterating the problem of identity noted that the rationalisation of the critic validates art to the market. That the critics are products of western thought means that the parameters that they use to judge contemporary art from the South and the discourse they attach to it do not relate to the peculiarities of that art. The solution then becomes an attempt by art from this region to escape that internalising of Eurocentric thought unless it leads to a dynamic fusion of cultures rather than a watering down of our product. Yet that solution becomes unattainable because of the geo-political one-upmanship and the economic disparities that are weighed against the South.

2.2 PRACTICING INTERCULTURALISM

Moderator: Miguel Pereira, Choreographer, Lisbon, Portugal

This working group examined intercultural collaborations i.e. the challenges of bringing together two (or more) artists having the same artistic practice but coming from a different cultural background. These kinds of shows are constantly being staged on the premise that the language of the body is universal and that dancers can express themselves across cultures and that their performances can parallel or complement each other. These collaborations are also touted as a tool for the development of the dialogue between people and cultures. The question then was: What was at stake in these encounters?

Mr. Pereira opened the workshop with a personal testimony of the professional conflict and difficulties he encountered while trying to stage a collaborative show with an Egyptian dancer. Their conflict though did not appear to be of an intercultural nature but rather one of personalities. It was evident that though of Egyptian origin, Miguel's performance partner's training was in euro-centric dance forms. The issues highlighted for instance her reluctance to do belly dances as merely incidental in the fact that they didn't allude to her Islamic background as alleged but it seemed that she wouldn't do

them because it wasn't consistent with the (Eurocentric) dance forms that she had internalised.

Regardless of that, the challenges of these intercultural performances were laid bare by the working group. The fact that the language of the body and dance were not universal was reiterated and was seen as the main reason why these collaborations were difficult to stage. Even though the two practitioners had the largely similar training and artistic influences, the expressions they would employ to mimic certain actions or emotions were meant to differ as these would be largely influenced by the environment and exposures within which each of them grew.

3.0 LOCAL PROBLEMS; LOCAL SOLUTIONS

Though the working theme of the Dance Encounters was Identities, the challenges facing the practice of dance in the region were discussed in great detail. The participants not only presented the problems as they were but also outlined solutions and or approaches to the same.

The central problem was seen as that of audiences. There was not a significant audience for contemporary art in the region beyond a very transient expatriate one. Because of this, the challenges and solutions discussed were geared mainly towards providing avenues and modes of audience development. These were identified as:

- i. Cultivate new audiences by taking dance to the neighbourhoods and exploring new performance spaces.
 - Have a divergent set of repertoires that fit within each of these spaces i.e. what you present in the neighbourhoods becomes different from what you present in the city centre as the audiences differ.
- ii. Dance companies must keep thinking about what they want to tell the people.

- Work into the repertoire such social commentary and other useful themes and make sure that the audience relates to them.
 - Engage the audience by researching into them. Bear in mind the audience and try to translate their stories into performance pieces.
- iii. Make the community understand/ appreciate that art is a worthy cause.
- Dance must be more than a stage act and articulate political, economic and social agendas of the citizenry.
- iv. Build knowledge base on dance.
- Create linkages with institutions of higher learning.
 - Lobby decision makers to have Dance included in the curriculum.
- v. Develop and sustain a working relationship with the mainstream media and Corporates.
- vi. Invest in quality both of the performance and the stage including using decent props even in informal/ makeshift performance spaces.
- vii. Ensure that good role models are seen to be coming from the Dance scene.