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*Photo 1. Faustin Linyekula in Festival of Lies. Photo by Agathe Poupeney.*

# Performing Acupuncture on a Necropolitical Body: Choreographer Faustin Linyekula's Studios Kabako in Kisangani, Democratic Republic of Congo

Ariel Osterweis Scott

**F**austin Linyekula stages what I shall call “geo-choreography” in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). What is choreography if not an embodied practice that demands a continual reordering of space? Geo-choreography reorders the urban landscape choreographically without colonizing it. Instead, it establishes a network of architectural sites within that landscape whose effect I shall endeavor to describe in this essay. In 1993 Congolese choreographer Linyekula went into exile for eight years, during which time he attended university in Kenya and studied theater in London, only to be pressured by the British government to return to Kenya, where he was introduced to dance theater. In 2001 Linyekula returned to the DRC, where he founded his contemporary dance company, Studios Kabako, in Kinshasa, the country's capital.<sup>1</sup> Working out of both Kinshasa and Paris, Linyekula established an international career as an experimental dance maker. After five years (in 2006) he transferred his company from Kinshasa to his hometown, Kisangani. Located in the northeastern DRC, this haunted urban terrain has been devastated by political violence, including that of the Second Congo War (1998–2003) and its aftermath.<sup>2</sup> In trying to rediscover a sense of belonging for himself and for others, Linyekula is presently designing a network of studios for emerging artists throughout Kisangani. Linyekula's dance company and network of studios taken together, and housed under the same name of Studios Kabako, encourage a fluid movement between the social and the artistic.

Working in and across the urban landscape, Linyekula's geo-choreography recontextualizes multiple spaces and forms of cultural production. For example, he places popular

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performance forms in theaters that normally present contemporary dance, and he brings contemporary dance into parts of Kisangani steeped in popular culture. One repeated component of Linyekula's spatial recontextualizations is *ndombolo*, a popular form of Congolese music, as well as the popular dance form it has inspired. Postcolonial theorist Achille Mbembe and anthropologist Filip De Boeck have interpreted these forms as part of a culture of death. They attribute its force and popularity to the false promise of hope offered by its driving sounds and material ostentatiousness. *Ndombolo* is the sonic and corporeal practice that best exemplifies the DRC as a necropolitical state. Furthermore, both commentators see it as a musical culture that mimics the contentious nature of war. Linyekula's current work for both his dance company and his studio workshops consciously engages with *ndombolo* in an attempt to reconfigure its bellicose associations.

### **Choreography, Ndombolo, and the Culture of Death**

In cities such as Kinshasa, generational order has been disrupted by mass killings. Society is increasingly shaped by a youth culture defined by—and continuously reappropriating—horror. Living with death characterizes a society subsumed by what Mbembe calls “necropolitics,” or “the power of death.” “Necropolitics and necropower,” explains Mbembe, “account for the various ways in which, in our contemporary world, weapons are deployed in the interest of maximum destruction of persons and the creation of *death-worlds*, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*” (2003, 39–40; emphasis in the original). For Mbembe, *ndombolo* and the dancing it engenders is born of necropolitical social conditions. In his essay “Variations on the Beautiful in the Congolese World of Sounds” (2007), Mbembe theorizes the aesthetics of violence that informs *ndombolo*: “[Congolese] music ‘breaks bones’ . . . and ‘hurls bodies’ . . . causing women and men to ‘behave like snakes’ . . . The body is not so much ‘harmed’ as it becomes a site of transgression, the locus of a blurring—between the transcendental and the empirical, the material and the psychic” (2007). In his most recent works for the stage, Linyekula has drawn from the energy of *ndombolo* music in order to explore the carnal possibilities central to *ndombolo*'s power and popularity. “For several years, *ndombolo*, Congolese pop music, has been haunting my pieces,” Linyekula says. “Bastard [child] of rumba, traditional rhythms, church fanfares and Sex Machine funk, pimped by local brewers, *ndombolo* delivers loads of energy” (Linyekula n.d). According to Linyekula, a typical *ndombolo* event in Kinshasa or Kisangani unfolds such that

Concerts invite you at 9pm. Don't come before midnight but be prepared to stay until dawn. . . . Listen to . . . songs you know by heart . . . drink, . . . eat brochettes, dance and flirt. Musicians . . . singing their own praises, power, beautiful women and expensive stuff, designer cloth and luxury cars . . . As if everything were granted in a country where everything is to be built again each morning. (Linyekula n.d.)

In *Kinshasa: Tales of the Invisible City* (2004), Filip De Boeck traces the musical form

and its surrounding culture back to the popular music star Papa Wemba in the 1980s. “This movement,” writes De Boeck, “escalated into real fashion contests and potlaches in which youngsters would display their European fashion designer clothes, in an attempt to outdo each other” (De Boeck and Plissart 2004, 54). The materialism associated with ndombolo’s musical culture has, for De Boeck, recently taken on new and more threatening forms:

Not only do the music and its accompanying dance styles reflect, and reflect upon, the violence that pervades the city and Congolese society at large, but the frequent clashes between avid followers of rival bands have themselves become increasingly responsible for the mounting insecurity in Kinshasa’s public spaces. (2004, 55)

Congolese music and the dances it inspires nonetheless provide rare and vital outlets for artistic expression. But, as Linyekula’s own experience demonstrates, the decision to participate in almost any form of public art or performance in the DRC carries with it the potential for personal harm. In her field notes from a recent visit to Kisangani, arts presenter Cathy Zimmerman writes:

Faustin [Linyekula] . . . worries about artistic freedom, as freedom of expression in general is very much in danger these days under Kabila [president of the DRC]; and there have been times when Faustin was told he was in danger. This is due mainly because Faustin and Studios Kabako are gaining in reputation and influence. . . . Two weeks ago, a journalist friend of Faustin’s was suspected of inciting against the government and the government confiscated his notes, cell phone, and computer. Since the journalist was in contact with Faustin, it was feared that Faustin and his family might be in danger and the journalist told Faustin that he should leave the country for a while. The journalist was later cleared and Faustin stayed put. Still, I cannot imagine working as an artist under such conditions and Faustin, at times, finds it difficult to continue.<sup>3</sup>

Despite these risks, Linyekula has continued to produce works for local as well as international consumption. In his willingness to explore the possibilities of ndombolo in his choreography, Linyekula risks entering an arena that Mbembe characterizes as a crucial aspect of Congolese culture, a zone of participation and productivity that appears to offer the incredible potential for liberation from war but that simultaneously risks re-enacting cycles of violence.

“Congolese music carries with it illusion, sycophancy, lies, deception, and ostentatiousness,” remarks Mbembe, “making the dancing subject into someone who is putting on an act for himself and others alike” (2007). In the works staged by his dance company, Linyekula intervenes amidst the conflicting features of ndombolo and popular Congolese culture—between its illusory, sycophantic tendencies and its experimental, exploratory thirst for new forms of collective experience. “Shaped and sculpted by sound,” Mbembe describes, “the [dancing] subject relinquishes himself, erases from her face the expression of destitution” (2007). Popular social dancing to ndombolo thus eclipses for a brief moment the pain of

poverty and war but only and specifically because of its most depraved and despicable aspects. The “ostentatiousness” to which Mbembe refers is similarly noted by De Boeck: “In spite of, or maybe precisely because of its extreme poverty, Kinshasa’s aesthetic regime of the body has turned it into a veritable cult of elegance, culminating in the movement of the *Sape*, an acronym for the Society of Fun Lovers and Elegant Persons” (De Boeck and Plissart 2004, 54). Central to Linyekula’s intervention is a critique of “Sape.” By embracing “Sape,” young urban Congolese entrenched in the culture of ndombolo mimic commercial hip-hop’s idea of “bling.” “Bling”—the ostentatious display of materiality (shiny jewelry, cars, and even women) is already a mimicry of wealth. Mbembe refers to ndombolo dance’s culture of “Sape” or “bling” as “counterfeiting” (2007). Driven by the performance of wealth, competitive ndombolo music and dance “battles” can escalate such that their violence mimics war. Ultimately, Mbembe suggests, the culture of counterfeiting and mimicry stages a mimicry of death itself, thus helping to reproduce the necropolitical sociocultural climate of violence and retribution from which it would seem to offer an escape.

“Bling” and “Sape” are critiqued in Linyekula’s projects. He eliminates the fetish objects associated with popular music’s consumerist cults. The few material objects that figure in his work almost always appear as if salvaged from oblivion. Indeed, his is a scavenger’s practice:

[I am] trying to show a body that refuses to die. Scavenging through the ruins of what I thought was a house in search of clues: a poem by Rimbaud, Banyua rituals my grand-mother took me through, Ndombolo dance steps from a music video by Papa Wemba, Latin classes with Father Pierre Lommel . . . Aesthetics of survival . . . Bundling together whatever comes my way to build a temporary shelter. (2005)

In *more more more . . . future*, Linyekula self-consciously stages a scene of popular dance’s counterfeiting habit: he and a fellow member of his all-male ensemble react to the ndombolo-punk sounds of an onstage band by dancing together in a knowing lilt—step touch, step touch. Yet, their imperfect unison reveals a counterfeiting, an imitative mirroring that does not amount to precise simultaneity. The men’s costumes consist of bulbous layers of colorful reflective material (think Michelin man meets crinkly detritus turned hip-hop sheen amidst grotesque, botanical blooms). These costumes—bizarre caricatures that mimic the ostentatious clothing fads periodically enveloping pop culture—seem designed to underscore and, simultaneously, to render absurd the impulse toward movement that arises “spontaneously” through the music of the band with which they share the stage.

Beneath the mockery of ostentatiousness exhibited by the costumes in *more more more . . . future*, Linyekula and his dancers draw upon the productive energies Mbembe identifies as ndombolo’s precarious potential. Mbembe locates a distinct beauty in the dance that accompanies popular musical forms such as ndombolo:

Congolese dance is a carnal endeavor. Against . . . ideologies that would cast the body as a prison for the soul, dancing here is a celebration of the flesh. The body is in absolute flux and music is invested with the power to enter it, penetrating it

to the core. Music produces psychic, somatic and emotional effects on the organs and limbs, subjecting them to the rule of waste. . . . In addition to existing as flux, the body is also a force-field of contrasts. Music engages in a struggle with these forces. Never simply movement of the human form, Congolese dance embodies something that resembles a search for original life, for perpetual genesis, and, through this, for an ideal of happiness and serenity.<sup>4</sup> (Mbembe 2007)

Linyekula mobilizes ndombolo's generative impulse in order to raise questions about the future of the DRC.

In *more more more . . . future* (2009), Linyekula and several contemporary dance-trained performers collaborate with the renowned ndombolo guitar soloist Flamme Kapaya and the Congolese hip-hop dancer Dinozord. In preparing the piece, Linyekula looks to the past in an attempt to "imagine more future":

The energy of 70s and 80s punk movements in Europe and America comes to my mind . . . how young people took music to destroy everything around, in a self-claimed no-future society. If it's impossible for us to send to hell a future that we never had, if it's difficult to go on ruining our pile of ruins, let's try to dream . . . feet firmly . . . on the ground, just to imagine more future. (Linyekula, n.d.)

As Linyekula sees it, one way to allow a space for "more future" is to untangle ndombolo from its agonistic tendencies, replacing prestige-driven battles with unconventional collaborations. He asks, "Why not [use] the fantastic energy of guitars and voices, not to

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*Photo 2. Papy Ebonati, Dinozord, and Faustin Linyekula in more more more . . . future.  
Photo by Agathe Poupeney.*



sustain dreams as thin as the cheap paper handkerchiefs sold in the streets of Kinshasa, but on the contrary, to [state] difficulties, dead ends, mistakes and the poor legacy of our fathers?” (n.d.) His personal style of contemporary dance blends the bodily articulation of a dancer trained in Western as well as African techniques with the experimental impulse found in the somatic theater of Kenyan director-choreographer Opiyo Okach. Linyekula’s first professional performances unfolded under Okach’s tutelage.<sup>5</sup> Okach’s contemporary choreography, inclusive of nondance techniques such as mime and physical theater, and informed by research into ritual ceremonies, constitutes one of Linyekula’s primary influences.

In Linyekula’s works for the stage, ndombolo musicians, contemporary dancers, and hip-hop dancers imagine relationships and forms of experience, performance, or expression that are unhinged from the empty, consumer-obsessed fantasies commonly found in Congolese popular culture. He appropriates ndombolo to a different end. As a part of that culture, the music itself demands that space be given over to improvisation. By inserting ndombolo music into a concert dance setting, Linyekula and his company make the social element of their art explicit, relinquishing the comfort and control of memorized movements for the music-driven, corporeal risks that ndombolo demands of its most ardent enthusiasts. As a popular form, ndombolo dance is entirely improvised. In his choreography Linyekula cultivates a tension between spontaneous invention and prescribed phrases. He places special significance upon his sense of improvisation as a survival tactic and a means of self-preservation rather than an expression of artistic taste: “Improvisation here is not an aesthetic luxury, but a state of living, surviving: in such a hostile context, where one never really knows what tomorrow will be made of (another war? An [epidemic]?), one needs to know how to improvise to remain alive” (Linyekula 2005). Like Mbembe, Linyekula conceives of improvisation—even in vernacular contexts—as an elaboration of the “search for original life.” This search may be desperate, frenzied, or clumsy, but its principle drive is survival, not “aesthetic luxury.”

Linyekula’s staged improvisations and modifications of popular music thus serve as dynamic counterweights to what Mbembe refers to as the “aesthetics of vulgarity.” Mbembe employs this term to characterize government-sponsored performance spectacles in various postcolonial nations, programs that pander obsequiously to the “*commandement*,” or corrupt postcolonial leadership (Mbembe 2001, III).<sup>6</sup> In reflecting on popular dances inspired by ndombolo music, De Boeck observes that the dancing body consumes and recasts the corrupt power of the *commandement*: “In and through dance, the juvenile body thus appears as a subversive site, as a corporeal locus which reflects, and reflects upon, the violence generated by official cultural and political grammars that have been characterized by some [Mbembe in particular] as necropolitical, as the work of death” (De Boeck 2005, 16). Dance scholar Brenda Dixon Gottschild finds that Linyekula attempts to “work with choreographic movement, energy, rhythm, the body and its physical presence,” answering “the challenge to remain standing, vertical, in spite of a crushing environment” (Gotschild 2007, n.p.). “I am showing the individual,” he says, “in a context where there is no space for individuals . . . I speak in my own name, not in the name of ‘all Congolese’ or [worse] ‘all Africans’” (qtd. in Gottschild 2007).

Earlier performances such as *Spectacularly Empty II* (2003) display similar fusions of improvisatory movement and absurd, improvised, or seemingly scavenged costuming: elaborately detailed ensembles are replaced with destructible pelvic wraps made of propaganda-filled newspapers. Linyekula has been known to forgo subtle performance lighting, choosing instead “artificial light: lamps, lanterns, and strings of light bulbs” (Gottschild 2007). Refusing the feigned elegance others might associate with “Sape”—not to mention much dance and theater staged on Western proscenium—Linyekula constructs an imaginative terrain of broken goods and material fragments, a playground of “urban detritus” (Gottschild 2007). In assembling such remnants, Linyekula’s influences range from ephemera, poetry, and video dancing to somatic theater, improvisation, and live vocalizations distorted electronically by a DJ.

*Festival of Lies* (2007) includes standard performance-length productions in theater settings as well as temporally unbounded pre- and post-performance festival-like gatherings that stage informal encounters through a variety of channels. In one iteration of *Festival of Lies*, African musicians play as the audience enters the space of the theater, a hybrid environment evoking at once a black box theater, jazz lounge, potluck feast, and ndombolo concert, attempting to restage elements of collective experience found in urban Congolese culture. *Festival of Lies* complicates practices of cultural importation; at each tour stop (in cities such as San Francisco, New York, and Avignon), Linyekula employs African musicians and chefs who are living as immigrants in that locale. If Western audiences attend these events expecting to sample African culture through Linyekula himself,

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*Photo 3. Faustin Linyekula and Marie-Louise Bibish Mumbu in Festival of Lies.*  
*Photo by Agathe Poupeney.*



they discover that Linyekula has instead assembled locally residing sub-Saharan African artists and chefs whose presence, if previously unrecognized, now becomes visible.

Linyekula's personal role in these pieces is unclear; he observes the space as he performs inside it, exposing the audience to what appears to be a preparatory process as he arranges fluorescent light bulbs and cords across the floor. The soundtrack for his movement is similarly hybrid. The live music gives a sense of a concert happening in the present, but it is interspersed with a seemingly detached or displaced urban soundtrack that conjures the hustle and bustle of a city street. Other audio elements include fragments from speeches by the DRC's various postcolonial leaders, with projected translations in English. Male bodies on the floor shift back and forth not to the live music but to the soundtrack. The bricolage materiality of Linyekula's scenic and sonic elements is matched by the hybridity of his movement. The shifting bodies give way to a solo by Linyekula that highlights his personal style: fragmented, in that his limbs seem to break and come together, yet always connected by a liquid fluidity, demonstrating surrender amidst control. At the conclusion of the solo, the rest of the performers join Linyekula, hovering over and falling onto the fluorescent bulbs. "Thank you all for being here," Linyekula says in his address to the audience. *Festival of Lies* thus re-stages the DRC's troubled urban spaces abroad, in an international context, as sources for and of cultural production, refiguring a history and identity that has thus far had trouble imagining itself beyond ruins. Linyekula's commitment to encounter depends on such forms of spatial recontextualization, creating the familiar out of the unfamiliar, the unfamiliar out of the familiar. Such exercises in alienation and recognition become productive templates for imagining social cohesion on a scale larger than the stage. Ultimately, in these events, Linyekula is a scavenger of time, tracing errant bits that history would rather forget, offering fragile re-collections of images, objects, dance, and sound through strategic, imaginative productions that exceed the boundaries of the proscenium.

### **Studios Kabako, Raw Earth Architecture, and Kisangani Reimagined**

The Studios Kabako network currently under construction in Kisangani is designed to initiate a process of healing. This process begins with a series of questions that demand a re-imagining of the city itself: "How do we live here? . . . How do [we] continue to work here? . . . How do we create spaces where people can think it's possible to imagine things for the arts? . . . How do we continue to imagine a future for us here, from the arts to the city life at large?" (Linyekula, in telephone interview with the author, June 1, 2008). As Mbembe has noted, "Belgian colonial rule was to a large extent an endeavor aimed at restructuring local time and space" (2007). Linyekula's dispersal of creative spaces across the city employs choreography's project of spatio-temporal restructuring as a model to confront the spatio-temporal damage inflicted over the course of the country's colonized past. His efforts thus attempt to transpose what Mbembe refers to as the "repressed topographies of cruelty" into productive spaces of experimentation in which artistic practice can inform larger social bodies: geo-choreography (2003, 40).<sup>7</sup>

Although Linyekula seeks transformation from within, relying on the local to effect

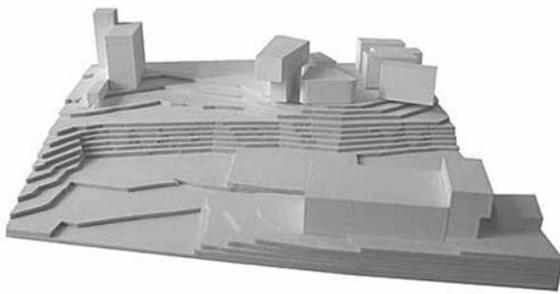


*Photo 4. Land acquired for a Studios Kabako residency site in Kisangani, DRC. Photo by Cathy Zimmerman.*

point is not to erase evidence of European involvement in the Congo—a French architecture school is advising local workers in the construction process—but to demonstrate that lasting, valuable products can be manufactured from resources so commonplace or familiar as to be neglected. The external support Linyekula receives is used to guide local artists and builders to be more self-sustaining. “We use the most available material at home, gesturing to the rest of the community that raw earth is not a material that we should despise, it’s material from which you can do sustainable things,” Linyekula explains (interview with the author).

Studios Kabako’s multiple spaces are designed to act upon the city “like acupuncture.” The sequential “puncturing” of the earth initiated by the construction of Studios Kabako thus parallels the philosophy of healing that is practiced in acupuncture. “When you connect the dots,” Linyekula says, “you begin healing or appeasing the body” (interview with the author). In the context of Kisangani, such healing practices force the individual to grapple with a place that has betrayed him, ejected him, and confronted him with loss. Linyekula is known for stating, “My body is my only country” (Van Reybrouk n.d.). The spiritual component of both acupuncture and Linyekula’s work is such that the body

*Photo 5. Architectural plan for Studios Kabako in Kisangani, DRC. Photo courtesy of project architect Baerbel Mueller.*



change, he has also been aided by the prestigious Prince Claus award, as well as various French funding sources.<sup>8</sup> His commitment to the local is reflected not only in the self-conscious insertion of his arts centers into specific areas and neighborhoods of the city but also in the raw earth architectural techniques being used to construct the studios themselves. These techniques favor mud and clay over steel and glass, producing vivid reminders of the ground underfoot. The

is called upon as a kinesthetic vessel of memory. In “American Acupuncture and Efficacy: Meanings and Their Points of Insertion,” medical anthropologist Linda L. Barnes explores the nuanced meanings that “healing” carries within the practice of acupuncture. According to anthropologist James Waldram, whom she quotes: “Healing . . . can occur while disease remains; heal-

ing can . . . even prepare for death” (Barnes 2005, 254). Acknowledging the possibility of healing while disease remains provides artists working in traumatized environments such as the DRC with a template for working in a space of death. It also liberates Linyekula’s project from Western, market-driven paradigms that prefer binaries such as success or failure, healthy or sick. Barnes’s and Waldram’s suggestion that acupuncture can “even prepare for death” departs from much of Western medicine’s emphasis on the avoidance of death, either through its repression or through the prolongation of life. Linyekula’s practice is one of acceptance of death rather than denial. Studios Kabako not only reimagines the culture of death, it is founded upon its very fact: “Kabako, the one after whom the dance company was named, died . . . of bubonic plague in a small village without cemetery . . . buried under a coffee tree. The body, even the corpse, is a locus of pity and oblivion” (Linyekula, qtd. in Van Reybrouk n.d.). Nonetheless, Linyekula believes in the collective political strength of the “people who are willing to beat a personal path in this environment” (Ruigrok 2007). Such a collective is founded upon a sense of shared loss: “Today what I see is that my real heritage is a pile of ruins,” observes Linyekula, “but when I was growing up I was told I had a stable home. This is something I share with my peers” (interview with the author).

The portion of Studios Kabako dedicated to providing workshops in Kisangani is deliberate and incremental in its expansion and diverse in its offerings. “We acquired a piece of land in the central administrative hub of the city,” Linyekula explains, “and are acquiring another piece of land in the left bank of the city by the [Congo] river, which is the most populated yet neglected area” (interview with the author). Because not all the cultural centers have been built, the bare earth underfoot provides the grounds on which to conduct many of the monthly workshops. In Kisangani creative urgency overrides the need for architectural completion. “We cannot wait until we have the buildings to start something,” Linyekula says, “The space can begin to exist first as a mental space before materializing as a physical space” (interview with the author). The activities sanctioned by the individual centers vary. The first is a stage, a performance space dedicated to presenting pieces by workshop participants; the second, a studio that provides arts residencies, encouraging communication with the outer world; the third, a “bubble-like” space for rehearsal, recording, and editing, in which individual artists are free to experiment without distraction (interview with the author).

The recognition he has garnered abroad has allowed Linyekula to accumulate external grants and awards and to form connections with renowned international artists interested in teaching workshops at Studios Kabako. Studios Kabako focuses its attention on young adults, “people in their twenties who have made a commitment to becoming professional artists” (interview with the author). Working with those who have already imagined a career in the performing arts, Linyekula believes, is a more effective means of creating change. His hope is that the present generation of Studios Kabako artists will encourage future generations to communicate through experimental performance. Six-week workshops cover various subjects from theater and film, to music, choreography, and arts management.

Too often, artists train only in their chosen discipline, without learning the tools to



*Photo 6. Choreographer Hafiz Dhaou conducting a workshop at Studios Kabako in Kisangani, DRC in October 2009. Photo by Virginie Dupray.*

support their practice. Linyekula hopes that by engaging in a network of spaces dedicated to a full range of arts practices, young artists can begin to document their work and place it in conversation with the work of others. Other events engage much larger constituencies:

In October [2009], Studios Kabako produced a day-long music event featuring local hip hop artists in which 4000 people attended. The day was totally peaceful and created a hunger in the community for more. . . . The featured group, *Pasnas*, led by a singer named Bastion, is a hip hop music group, which is now touring in Africa, under the auspices of Studios Kabako. . . . At their temporary offices in Kisangani, they have set up a sound production studio where they are cultivating other music and sound production artists. . . . All this is part of Faustin and Virginie's vision to create an arts community in Kisangani and to provide ways for artists to make a living through their art.<sup>9</sup> (Zimmerman 2009)

The production of such events exemplifies Linyekula's belief that the arts can allow for the social construction of an additional, physically manifested dimension of the imaginary.

Through this process, Linyekula suggests, "You can use the arts as a starting point to talk to the city on a larger scale" (interview with the author). Studios Kabako thus attempts to reconcile such "imaginary cities" with present-day Kisangani. The coalescence of death, Christian fundamentalism, and popular performance's mimicry of war has upset

the balance between the public and the private, the sacred and the profane. In a culture where spectacle abounds in unexpected locations, the experimental artist must struggle to identify her own stage and be careful not to undermine the value of popular entertainment in the process. It is not unusual in urban DRC to find rap or ndombolo performances at churches and religious rhetoric in bars. De Boeck cites an increased theatricalization of urban Congolese public spaces, specifically Kinshasa's bars and churches: "The religious transformation which Congolese society is currently undergoing has contributed to a reconfiguration, if not an obliteration, of the dividing lines between public and private space, as well as an increasing theatricalization of the city. . . . The space of the church has become the city's main stage" (De Boeck 2005, 56). Though not adverse to spirituality, Studios Kabako offers a secular stage separate from the conflicted battleground of church spaces. In their mimicry of war and gangster rap's antagonism on the church's stage, Congolese ndombolo and hip-hop "battles" intensify the imaginary-as-death. Recently, Linyekula curated a performance in Kisangani on behalf of Studios Kabako in which three local MCs who usually battle one another came together on the same stage to share their talents. Such gestures refigure De Boeck's dystopian vision of Congolese popular culture. They reconceptualize an otherwise violent, theatrical public space into a collaborative arena for collective experience through individual expression.

In acupuncture, healing is defined as "any change that allows you to say that something important has happened here" (Barnes 2005, 253). By performing a kind of architectural "acupuncture" on Kisangani's urban landscape, Linyekula advocates efforts to effect change in one's immediate surroundings, even when this locus is removed from more recognizable places of social or political power. Barnes suggests that "Given the local-global interface, each . . . locale where acupuncture is practiced creates its own particularized version of local knowledge" (2005, 241). To extend the acupunctural metaphor to Studios Kabako is to envision ways in which locally produced knowledge can provide alternatives to official varieties of signification or state-authorized forms of discourse. "Local knowledge" also conjures Clifford Geertz's anthropological term, identifying crucial forms of meaning-making in local contexts that "preserve the individuality of things and enfold them in larger worlds of sense at the same time (Geertz 1983, xi). To explore a site where "something important has happened" is not to cure or to make sense of horror but to allow for the possibility to heal, even if difficulties remain.

Art making is a durational practice, one that can forego resolution in order to question or identify; it might also simply leave an imprint, serving as a means with which a place might be marked as the site of an event. "Everyone has a right to culture," Linyekula says. By bringing his body—his "home"—to the geographic locale from which he has at times felt most alienated, Linyekula forces himself to grapple with the DRC's own complicated identity crises:

My dance will be an attempt to remember my name. . . . Zaire was but a lie invented by Mobutu, a dead exiled land. Perhaps my name is Kabila; perhaps I'm a bastard son of King Leopold II. . . . a kid soldier scavenging through a heap of lies, raped virgins and cholera. Democratic Republic of Congo was my real name.

. . . My portion of Africa doesn't care about me. Years of war, raped women, epidemics, millions killed. . . At best I'm left with some energy to survive on my heap of ruins. (Gottschild 2007)

For Linyekula to state that “dance will be an attempt to remember [his] name” is to point to dance's potential to kinetically assemble multiple temporalities at once—that of history, that of memory, and that of the present. Laboring toward an imagined identity, the dancing body provides a spatio-temporal demonstration that the “imagination is primarily . . . interaction between the past, the present and the projection of a future” (De Boeck 2005, 157). Linyekula chooses to linger in—and to transform—the imaginative space that threatens to reify death's specters. For De Boeck, imagination is both a theoretical concept that—like choreography—bridges multiple temporalities and multiple social players, and that which defines the haunting nature of death in the Congo.

The imagination is . . . also interaction between social actors, or between societies, the relations of which are selectively shaped by their respective “imagining consciousnesses”. . . The imaginary, as an alternative field site, therefore presents novel opportunities for more detailed analytic scrutiny of the multiple transformations that African society is currently undergoing. (De Boeck 2005, 156–57)

By conceiving of the imaginary as “an alternative field site,” De Boeck emphasizes social potentials and possibilities that may only exist in the minds of the individuals living in a given town, city, or country. Such a method of “fieldwork” can trace dreams, fears, regrets,

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*Photo 7. Papy Ebotani, Djodjo Kazadi, Faustin Linyekula, and Marie-Louise Bibish Mumbu in Festival of Lies. Photo by Agathe Poupenny.*



and failures, not to mention those goals that do not reach completion due to circumstances of power, corruption, or time. Whether or not all the buildings envisioned for Studios Kabako get built as currently planned, there appears to be ample reason to note that collaborative art making has (and is) already occurring. This art making promises to generate further imaginings on the part of numerous participants. One can already say “something has happened here.” The urban has become the spatial terrain upon which the imagination labors: “There are cities and cities,” Linyekula says. “There are cities which you kill in silence, cities that you love and cities that you give birth to every day. There is the city which you carry within, there is the city that you dream of, there are imaginary cities that clash in the imaginary world” (Van Reybrouk n.d.).

## Notes

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1. In a 2005 interview Linyekula explained the conditions of his exile: “In 1991, I wanted to attend college, but the universities were considered dangerous, threatening places by the regime and were shut down. So, in 1993, I went to Kenya in order to attend University there, and I remained there for three years, until 1996. From Kenya, I went to London, where I became involved in theater, but England began to view me with suspicion because of having lived in two countries on the African continent, and I was forced to return to Kenya. It was then that I began to dance at a dance theater workshop taught by Alphonse Pierou, a dancer from the Ivory Coast. Three years later, I began to choreograph. I began in 1997 with a collaboration with Okyio Okach. It was for nine artists. We took the piece to festivals around the country” (Singer 2005).

2. Kisangani and its surroundings are known for rich natural resources, including diamonds. Much political conflict—colonial and “post”-colonial—is linked directly and indirectly to mineral wealth.

3. Cathy Zimmerman, field notes, October 2009 (permission for use granted to the author in November 2009).

4. By “Congolese dance,” Mbembe refers to popular social dancing associated with contemporary musical forms such as ndombolo.

5. Opiyo Okach is a renowned Kenyan choreographer who works in Kenya and France and founded Kenya’s first contemporary dance company. He “trained at the Desmond Jones School of Mime and Physical Theatre in London,” and his work incorporates “research on traditional [Kenyan] ritual and performance” (see <<http://www.gaaraprojects.com/opiyookache.htm>>).

6. The *commandement’s* “agents [include] the party, policemen, soldiers, administrators and officials, middlemen, and dealers,” and “aesthetics of vulgarity” refer to the hyperbolic spectacle surrounding such events as welcoming a president back to his country as he drives into the capital from the airport (Mbembe 2001, III). Mbembe writes, “The *commandement* defines itself as a . . . fetish” (III).

7. By “repressed topographies of cruelty,” Mbembe refers to, among other things, land atop which the cruelties of slavery were enacted. This phrase can also be used to describe colonial and postcolonial topographies of Congolese history and contemporary warfare.

8. “Currently about one-third of Studios Kabako’s revenue is earned through touring and the rest is raised through French government support, significant commissions from European presenters, and other funding sources including the Prince Claus Fund” (Zimmerman).

9. Virginie Dupray is the managing director of Studios Kabako.

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