



# Modes of Professionalism:

## Inscribing Contemporary Dance in an African Context

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### Introduction

Speaking to a group of dance students from the West African region who had gathered in the framework of a professional training programme in contemporary choreography that took place in summer 2011 in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, Seydou Boro, one of the country's most internationally successful choreographers discussed the question of how contemporary dance should be defined and conceived of from a local perspective:

Contemporary dance doesn't mean anything today. There is nothing fixed. It's up to you to decide. [...] There is not one single truth, the truth is training. [...] You have to be trained, there is this truth. [...] To be trained, this is necessary. But on the level of creation, there is no truth. [...] Every person has a dance to be invented. Hence, there are only a thousand of dances, a thousand of performances that exist.<sup>1</sup> (Seydou Boro, 22 July 2011)

Seydou Boro insisted that every artist has to find his or her own style of 'writing' (*écriture*) and that there is no single dance technique that should be prescribed in order to create truly valuable art. He emphasised that not only the content but also the form of choreography depends on the creativity of the in-

dividual. Nevertheless – and this was the main point he wanted to make, the message he wanted to convey to the dance students – professional training is needed to acquire the necessary skills.

This essay deals with the dynamics of professionalisation within a contemporary urban performance genre that has been newly established and taken root on the African continent. Since the turn of the millennium, the international success and recognition of contemporary choreographers from Africa is a fact that can hardly be denied. Its manifestations in various parts of the world are more and more numerous, providing opportunities to secure livelihoods and gain not only symbolic capital and social prestige but economic profit. Yet, there is a lot of controversy about the way in which the success story of contemporary choreography from Africa should be told. Questions concerning asymmetrical power relations, the influence of economic inequalities, hegemonic political systems, and dominant symbolic orders are at the heart of the controversies: Is it a genuine artistic movement, generating context from within, or is the context in which it has gained significance – aesthetically, socially, politically, or economically – imposed from the outside? With an analysis of professionalisation processes – instead of engaging with ongoing debates about terminology and the labelling of 'African contemporary dance' or 'contemporary African dance' (Sanou 2008: 28) – I argue that the genre of contemporary dance exists on the continent and that its evo-

lution has to be understood as a professional 'art world' (Becker 2008) in the making. It is a process in which artists are inscribing their own visions of contemporary choreography in an African context.

Focusing on the contemporary dance scene in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, I contend that professionalisation processes are not necessarily leading to homogenisation but are also having diversifying effects that are reflecting the locality of 'global art worlds' (Belting 2009). I propose examining locality as an attribute of social space, which is constituted by complex and multilayered sets of social relations and translocal connections. I am particularly interested in the ways in which choreographers are dealing with and reflecting on these connections in their work, in the quality of the performance space (Ngugi Wa Thiong'o 1997) they are creating, and the dynamics of openness or closure that characterise these creations.

The term choreography (Greek: dance-writing) usually refers to the invention, composing, and fixing of sequences of movement. In a metaphorical sense, the notion of choreography can be understood as a generative pattern for creating the 'internal relations' of a performance space (*ibid.*: 12), namely the interplay of actors on stage, including the *mise-en-scène* and the audience. But the quality of the performance space, its characteristics in terms of a liberating and democratic 'open space' (*ibid.*: 19) or rather a prison-like 'territorial enclosure' (*ibid.*: 21), also depend on the 'external relations' of artistic practice, particularly its relations with the state and 'its actual or potential conflictual engagement with all the other shrines of power' (*ibid.*: 13) that are controlling access and contact with the performance space.

In contrast to Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, who was concerned with the politics of performance space within the national framework of post-colonial Kenya, my focus is on current processes of professionalisation, which not only concern both kinds of relations, internal and external, but also entail border-crossing relations on various scales. Therefore, instead of differentiating them in a dichotomous way and categorically opposing the intentions of the artist (liberation) and those of the state (control), I prefer to

analyse these relations as constitutive elements of a translocally and transnationally embedded professional 'art world' (Becker 2008). My approach is inspired by the concept of 'art worlds' brought forward by the American sociologist Howard Becker, who analyses artistic practice from an organisational point of view, focusing on the negotiation and establishment of routines, standards, and conventions, emphasising the need for collaborative working relations and networks. Yet, some of the underlying assumptions of his explicitly 'democratic' conceptualisation of art worlds, first published in 1982, certainly have to be revised, especially with regard to the transnational dimensions of professional links and networks that are constitutive for contemporary art worlds on the African continent, which are heavily dependent on foreign funding (Neveu Kringelbach 2013: 147-158; Sieveking 2013). Becker (2008: 378) claims: 'Someone is monopolising the field you want to work in? Move somewhere else and start your own field. You don't even have to compete with the other people. You can criticise them to your followers or ignore them, but they are not powerful enough and do not have enough of a monopoly to prevent you from doing anything'. This ideal of artistic practice as unfolding within an open space seems almost utopian and ignores that artistic interactions and circulations 'are not always "free-flowing", but instead continually structured by group divisions, nation-state boundaries, and political and economic inequalities' (Winegar, Pieprzak 2009: 10).

Loosely following Arjun Appadurai's (1996) conceptualisation of locality, I consider the contemporary dance scene in Ouagadougou as a historically situated artistic 'neighbourhood'<sup>2</sup> that is being simultaneously shaped by the influence of national cultural institutions and politics<sup>3</sup> as well as by its translocal and transnational connections, which include personal and professional links with diverse local performance traditions. In order to assess the significance of locality in terms of its specific context-generating dimensions (Appadurai 1996: 184), I examine how social space is created in and through professional artistic practices, which entails paying attention to the ways in which these practices inscribe inequalities and recreate

a 'power geometry' (Massey 1994; Castryck & Sieveking 2014: 5) on the various scales of professional collaborations and interactions.

In this article, I concentrate on the micro-scale of actual performance, although the meso-scale of transnational cooperative links and networks will also be mentioned. Referring to two contemporary dance pieces created by choreographers from Burkina Faso that were shown during the festival Dialogues de Corps (DDC) 2012 in Ouagadougou, I analyse the kind of social space that is created and reflected through the pieces with a focus on their aesthetic dimensions. They display different modes of professional performance that not only reflect the effects of increasing social and economic disparities shaping urban art worlds on the continent (and elsewhere), but also indicate the proximity and interrelatedness of different social and cultural formations within a field of artistic performance that is increasingly diversifying and expanding its networks around the globe.

Instead of assuming that there is a single network of artistic connections and working relations that could qualify as *the* contemporary dance world, I suggest that there is a variety of artistic practices that can be labelled as 'contemporary' choreography, and that are constituted by constellations of partly overlapping, partly discrete, or disconnected sets of relations that acquire different meanings in different times and places. How the interplay and respective significance of the social, economic, or political dimensions of these relations may be shifting can be observed by examining how the contemporary dance world is organised within the framework of international festivals and biennales – a framework that has become the most recurrent dispositive model for the representation of 'global art', both in Africa and elsewhere (Filitz 2009).

### Contemporary Dance between Movement and Institution

In December 2012, the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition of the festival Dialogues de Corps was organised by the CDC – la Termitière in Ouagadougou. The festival – launched in 2001 by the company Salia nĩ Seydou,

co-founded by the internationally acclaimed choreographers Salia Sanou and Seydou Boro – had already been realised successfully with considerable international attendance and recognition for almost 10 years. Since the global financial crisis in 2008, however, the number of invited companies from abroad has continuously dropped, reflecting the effects of radically reduced cultural budgets in many important donor countries. In 2012, the agenda of the festival organisers concentrated more on increased visibility at the national level. For the first time, there was an effort to decentralise the festival by organising over one weekend a parallel mini-festival in Bobo Dioulasso, the second largest city of Burkina Faso. But the tiring transport conditions between the two cities, which had to be undertaken by bus, were a major challenge for the commuting artists while all the major events, including the more prestigious and expensive international productions, were still taking place in Ouagadougou. For the sake of the quality of the performances that were shown in both cities, the efforts to organise interconnections between different artistic neighbourhoods within the country had to be limited. Eventually, these efforts, as well as the 2011 edition that had been organised outside the usual temporal framework of global art biennales, had a rather disadvantageous effect on the festival in terms of its international visibility.

Yet, in 2010 there was still a very lively international participation, especially of upcoming artists from the West African region. Since the official inauguration of the CDC – la Termitière in 2006, it had become a central node in the networks of the contemporary choreographic movement on the continent. To have this space was of great importance for the evolution of the local contemporary dance scene. Set up with French funding and organisational support, the CDC nonetheless embodies a forceful attempt at gaining more autonomy concerning the framework for transnational artistic cooperation.

The CDC incorporates professional training as well as artistic creation and diffusion, including an indoor black box theatre space, offices, dormitories, and an outdoor area with Internet access and catering. Hence, the CDC provides facilities and resources that

had so far been accessible only through the Institut Français. Moreover, although the CDC is still linked to French institutions and networks, it is not administered by French expatriates but by local staff. As the American choreographer Ester Baker-Tarpage reported from her participation in the 2006 Dialogues de Corps festival that coincided with the inauguration of the CDC – la Termitière: ‘Several Burkinabe artists I spoke with during the festival were very proud to have their own independent space ran by and for artists from Burkina Faso, as one Burkinabe choreographer mentioned to me “This inspires me to one day build my own dance space in my neighborhood.”’<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, when I discussed with Seydou Boro, one of the co-directors of the festival during the 2010 edition of Dialogues de Corps, about his view of the major challenges in the field of contemporary dance in Burkina Faso, he was still concerned about the existence and sustainability of this artistic practice on local grounds: ‘First of all, it has to exist!’ (‘D’abord il faut qu’elle existe!’). In contrast to those voices criticising the ‘imported’ – or even ‘imposed’ – character of contemporary dance and its ‘artificial’ presence on the African continent (Fau 2003: 77), he was not worried about the lack of recognition or appreciation by local audiences. Rather, he underlined that the festival already had its own audience, largely composed of people who have a professional or personal interest in the event, such as peer performing artists or family members (Sieveking 2014: 58 f.). According to Seydou Boro, the major challenge in establishing contemporary dance in Ouagadougou was not lacking public recognition but a sustainable framework for professional training was needed to provide a local basis for the upcoming generation of young and ambitious performing artists. So far, training in contemporary dance is taking place mainly in the form of temporally restricted workshops, financed by foreign donors in the framework of cultural exchange, artistic development, or capacity building. Most of the time, these workshops have a short-term and project-bound character. Up until now, the three-year programme ‘Je danse donc je suis’, financed by the European Commission and carried out in a transnational cooperation with a dance centre in Mali between 2010 and 2013,

has been the only long-term training programme offered by the CDC (Sieveking 2014: 68). Making sure that contemporary dance exists in Burkina Faso in terms of an institutionalised, officially recognised profession established on local grounds requires a long-term perspective not only in the domain of training and knowledge transmission but also in terms of administration and management. In order to comply with global standards, professional training schemes cannot be based on transnational networking alone. They require collaboration with national state institutions as well, not least for the official recognition of certificates and the legal framework defining the status of the artist.

The requirements of a formal institutionalisation of artistic professions have produced a lot of tension within the local and national arenas of performing arts in Burkina Faso. Conflicts and debates about how the status of the artist has to be defined have been ongoing for years. Although Burkina Faso is internationally recognised as a very dynamic and productive ‘cultural place’ and has a special reputation among contemporary choreographers, the problems related to the issue of professionalisation are far from being resolved. And, although the problem of finance is essential, it is not the only one. In a contribution to an *Africultures*<sup>5</sup> special issue on contemporary dance published in 2001 – the time when the ‘artistic revolution’ (Mensah 2001: 3) on the African continent was gaining increasing attention in the international dance scene – the former manager of the company *Salia ni Seydou*, Michel Chialvo (2001: 19) stated that the organisation of the profession had not been accomplished yet and had to be concerned with the problem of permanence.

At the same time, Chialvo also pointed out the paradoxical aspects of the dynamics comprising contemporary dance in Africa. On the one hand, he characterised it as a border-crossing artistic movement, striving for emancipation and independence. On the other hand, he was very aware of the efforts of its protagonists to institutionalise dance as a recognised profession, which implies establishing formalised procedures and conventions, including the cooperation with national institutions and the adaptation of

international standards. According to Chialvo, the emancipatory force of the contemporary dance movement in Africa is not to be seen, in the first instance, in the militant spirit of the actors involved but in the concrete reality of daily work carried out with the conviction that dance can become a profession that secures a livelihood and allows for social mobility (Neveu Kringelbach 2013; 2014). From Chialvo's point of view, the inherent paradox of this movement is its specific mix of artistic revolution and livelihood concerns, which are converging in the process of professionalisation: 'It is in this mix between an obvious choreographic revolution and the conditions of existence of the artists that the huge paradoxes of this singular movement are to be found' (2001: 18; translation by the author).

Chialvo's emphasis of the singularity of the contemporary dance movement on the African continent reflects the enthusiasm that reigned at the moment of its sudden expansion around the turn of the century. Contextualising the evolution of the genre from a more locally tuned perspective, however, brings forward parallels and interconnections with the evolution and (trans)formation of other artistic genres.

### Contextualising the Artistic Neighbourhood in Ouagadougou

In Ouagadougou, as well as within the whole francophone West African region, the parallels between the evolution of the contemporary dance field and the field of contemporary theatre are particularly instructive. The paradoxical dynamics and tensions between an artistic movement and an institution in the making that characterise the process of professionalising contemporary choreography in Burkina Faso can be compared with the development of contemporary theatre in the West African region, as described by the German theatre scholar and current director of the Goethe-Institut in Ouagadougou, Thekla Worch. Based on empirical research in Cameroon and Burkina Faso, Worch (2008) examined in her master's thesis how the concept of 'contemporary theatre', also conceived of as 'artistic theatre' or text-based 'Autorentheater', was introduced and institutionalised as

a franco-African cultural co-production. Actors who identify with the 'contemporary' genre distinguish their work from the more popular forms of 'social theatre', which are characterised by an explicit developmentalist agenda. Moreover, they strongly reject the 'ethnic role' associated with the label of 'African theatre' (Dembelé 2010). Whereas the pioneers of the contemporary 'intellectual' theatre were mostly autodidacts, the professionalisation of the genre in francophone Africa has been strongly supported by French institutions (Worch 2008: 79). This does not imply, however, that French agencies have completely dominated, let alone determined, how this field has evolved within local artistic neighbourhoods.

In Ouagadougou, the field of contemporary theatre is very lively and dynamic, with strong links to other performing art genres that are highly interactive and often scarcely differentiated within local performance traditions. The traditional occupational group of *griots*, for example, encompasses orators or story tellers, musicians, and singers. Conversely, a characteristic of Ouagadougou's contemporary dance scene are the many personal connections in the domain of theatre. Many of the currently leading figures in the field of contemporary choreography in Burkina Faso have in fact been active within the domain of theatre, or even professionally trained as actors, before concentrating on dance. The two fields overlap in many ways since a mix of genres – encompassing storytelling, body language, live music, songs, and dance – is present in both domains. Most Burkinabé artists have a multidisciplinary background and make use of a variety of creative resources.

In the field of contemporary choreography, current procedures of artistic creation include the systematic deconstruction and combination of different elements of local performance traditions, repertoires, and styles. The possibilities to decontextualise and re-compose aesthetic elements, however, are limited when it comes to linguistic elements and translations from one language to another. Semantic meanings may just get lost through the disappearance of context. That the numerous theatre festivals in francophone Africa have not triggered as much international attention as the dance festival *Rencontres*

chorégraphiques de l'Afrique et de l'Océan Indien, launched in 1995 and realised by the French programme 'Afrique en Création',<sup>6</sup> can partly be explained by the restrictions imposed by language barriers and the fact that the body language of dance can be understood by a much wider audience all around the globe.

However, the Rencontres would not have been so successful if there had not been any local participation. According to Salia Sanou, who directed the Rencontres between 2001 and 2006, the event had such a powerful influence on local performing art scenes precisely because the competition created a vision of dance 'as an art and at the same time as a profession' ('à la fois comme un art et un métier') (Sanou 2008: 43). Not only promising prestige for the participants and economic rewards for the winners but as well as conveying a perspective on dance as a profession, it had a decisive effect on a broad range of newly created companies. In a book on contemporary dance in Africa edited by the French National Dance Centre, Sanou confirms and reviews the achievements of this controversial event. Among choreographers in Africa, the Rencontres raised a lot of questions concerning the aesthetics of contemporary dance, its qualities as a particular bodily technique, and as a mode of artistic creation to which individual artists had to adapt if they wanted to be part of the game. But the event also raised more general questions regarding the conditions of establishing dance as a collectively organised profession that can comply with current international standards. Sanou (ibid.: 47) explicitly mentions several elements of professionalism that have become much debated issues within local art scenes: the specific modes of functioning, the status of the artist, the role of national and international institutions, as well as the means of financing choreographic work. With the ongoing expansion and increasing diversification of the contemporary dance scene on the African continent, in Burkina Faso in particular, these questions have become more urgent. This became evident during a public round table organised at the occasion of the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the festival Dialogues de Corps in Ouagadougou in 2012 where similar questions were still discussed.

The rather disparate contributions to the round-table debate indicated that the networks and working conditions of choreographers in this particular artistic neighbourhood were far from coherent. Whilst the festival was going on, proving that professional artworks could be produced and presented locally, not all the scheduled events could be realised as planned and the international presence was lower than in previous years. Moreover, the programme was marked by a rather huge discrepancy between a few pieces invited from outside that had been produced on a very high level of technicality and required a lot of economic resources, and the majority of local productions that had been produced on a very low-cost level. At the same time, the choreographies presented also indicated diverging concepts of professionalism as I will illustrate with two pieces created by choreographers who are both considered as important founding figures and active promoters of the contemporary dance scene in Burkina Faso: 'Zouhan', conceived by Bienvenue Baziè and Auguste Ouédraogo, founders of the company Art Dev/Auguste-Bienvenue, and 'Au-delà des frontières' directed by Salia Sanou.<sup>7</sup>

### **'Zouhan' and 'Au-delà des frontières': The Open Space of Performance and the Overcoming of Boundaries**

'Au-delà des frontières' was created for the prestigious French dance festival Montpellier Danse in the summer of 2012 and was staged on the evening of the closing ceremony of the festival in Ouagadougou. It clearly marked its climax in terms of the high-technical level of performance and the international prestige of the various artists involved. 'Zouhan', by contrast, was a low-budget and in the current sense of non-human material infrastructure also a low-tech production, which had its premiere during the festival. Performed in an outdoor version adapted to the venue of the CDC and its immediate environment, the piece was characterised by a high degree of interaction with the festival audience, who received it with a lot of enthusiasm and joyful appreciation.

'Zouhan' means the spoken word (*la parole*) in Lyélé, the language of Bienvenue Baziè's ethnic origin.

The piece is conceived as a participatory spectacle preferably performed in an open space, although it can also be played on stage in a closed environment. 'Zouhan' is inspired by the idea of a family and community get together under the moonlight – a kind of sociality in which the old and young engage in a participatory exchange that is about to be lost in contemporary society, as is explained in the written documentation (dossier) of the piece. An atmosphere of openness and magic is evoked, where everything is reborn and memories of the past are interlaced with fairy tales in order to open the way for the future in an encounter of 'renaissance, rejoicing, initiation and transmission'.<sup>8</sup>

The central figure of the piece is a *griot* – owner of the word, guardian of oral history, and social mediator – embodied by professional storyteller and comedian, Kientega Pingdewinde Gerard, known as KPG. He became acquainted with the role of a traditional *griot* from his childhood as he was born into a family belonging to the occupational group of blacksmiths and son of an orator and mask performer. KPG, however, is also an accomplished 'modern' *griot*, professional actor and entertainer, educator, and transnational cultural entrepreneur who established a cultural centre in his village of origin from where he is frequently undertaking exchange projects with youth groups from Burkina Faso and France.<sup>9</sup> Whereas KPG assumes the single dominant role in the piece on the level of its semantic meanings, the parts of other artists involved are more interrelated, creating a dialogue between music and movement. In this interaction appears a traditional musician and kora player, Arouna Coulibaly, a female singer, actor and dancer, Mariam Pale, as well as the two dancer-choreographers, Bienvenue Baziè and Auguste Ouédraogo.

It was KPG who opened the premiere of 'Zouhan', taking the festival audience who had gathered in the yard of the CDC by surprise. First, he began talking to the audience in Moore, the language of the dominant ethnic group in the region of Ouagadougou. Then he switched to French, introducing himself in a cheerful and tongue-in-cheek manner as a storyteller, a descendant from a long line of venerable an-

cestors. After this introduction which encompassed a series of proverbs and witty jokes, he invited everybody to follow him to his imagined village, situated in the backyard of the CDC buildings. Any dispute, quarrel, and hassle between people present were to be silenced. He told the spectators that no conflict among them was allowed if they wanted to participate in the event. Constantly interacting with the crowd behind him, telling amazing stories about journeys across time and space, he then took the audience to a place where a large circle was prepared on the ground. Here, as he explained, a battle between two villages, each represented by a wrestler imbued with magical forces, was supposed to take place.

At this point in the performance, the audience was already in a very responsive and joyful mood. The atmosphere heated up and became more excited when the music started and the combatants were announced. Accompanied by enthusiastic cries and exclamations of fraught curiosity from the part of the audience, Auguste Ouédraogo and Bienvenue Baziè then started staging a scene of traditional wrestling, in a very playful manner, combining gestures of physical combat, attack, defence, and provocation with synchronically choreographed contemporary dance movements. Their wrestling-dance, merging into a series of synchronised pulsating movements, was accompanied by the mystic sound of an electronically amplified and strained traditional harp. Seated at the edge of the circle that marked the battleground, Mariam Pale gradually joined the performance. Starting with a low voice, first verbally commenting upon the combat and then singing softly in her mother tongue Dioula, her tone was rising and increasingly energetic, encouraging, and cheering the performers, then affronting and shouting at them<sup>10</sup> until finally joining in their movements.

Apart from this passage where the performance was determined by the interaction between the musician, the singer, and the dancers, the dramatic script of the whole piece entailed a constant interaction with the audience, entertained by the storyteller who took the crowd back to the front yard of the CDC once the battle was over. After the performance, which received very enthusiastic applause, one of the leading

figures of Burkina Faso's theatre and dance scene, Serge Aimé Coulibaly, commented that the event was an artistic 'revolution'. Accordingly, he qualified the piece as a radical break with mainstream contemporary dance aesthetics – an aesthetic that is very much tuned to the needs and expectations of cosmopolitan urban intellectual elites, but hardly 'readable' and understandable by the majority of the local population (Sieveking 2014: 58). 'Zouhan', by contrast, relies strongly on the aesthetic and technical devices of local performance traditions, encompassing a lot of witty and funny elements, skilfully prepared surprises, and spontaneous reactions by the audience. As far as the evening of the premiere was concerned, the first element of surprise had been the fact that the performance started half an hour earlier than announced in the programme – a surprise that had not been prepared in advance but rather decided on the spot by the coordinator of the festival who was worried that the audience might disperse while waiting for the beginning of 'Zouhan', since the piece that had been shown before it had ended earlier than planned. Consequently, those people who had come just in time to the venue in order to see 'Zouhan', including professional cultural agents like the director of the Institut Français, missed the most parts of it.

This circumstance, contingent as it was, indicates the significance of locality – not only as a physical location but also as a temporal situation – and the social framing of a performance. While the untimely beginning of 'Zouhan' during Dialogues de Corps 2012 in Ouagadougou was left uncommented upon by most of the participants, such a change in programme would have been noticed as a major disadvantage for the course of a spectacle within the framework of a professional dance festival in Europe, such as Montpellier Danse. At the same time, the incidence was also influenced by the relatively junior social and artistic position of the choreographers, who were either not able or not willing to claim superior authority vis-à-vis the festival coordinator and other staff members.

The choreographic vision of an open space and a 'renaissance' of community through moments of sharing brought forward by 'Zouhan', its implicit social and political agenda, as well as the notion of profes-

sionalism represented by the artists involved, stand in stark contrast to the impressions conveyed by the performance of 'Au-delà des frontières'. Not least because it was shown as the last piece of the festival and many important guests who had been invited for the preceding closing ceremony were present, the performance of the latter piece was executed in a much more secure and predetermined framework.

Moreover, 'Au-delà des frontières' is a piece that unfolds its narrative as a complex interplay of different artistic genres which are connected through a highly sophisticated arrangement of audio-visual technical supports and devices. The festival organisers were proud to prove with this piece, not only that choreographers from Burkina Faso are able to cope with the highest technical standards of the contemporary art world, but also that the indoor black box theatre stage of the CDC provides the necessary infrastructure to present such an artwork. The piece had attracted a large crowd of curious spectators but its performance took place in a closed space where not everybody who had come to see it was able to enter. Tickets had been sold out and the control of entrance permits at the door of the main CDC building, where the spectacle was to happen, took quite a long time, considerably delaying the beginning of the performance. Expectations were high and there was a lot of excitement in the air. The awe-inspiring atmosphere intensified when just before the performance started, it was announced that on the previous day, Salia Sanou and Seydou Boro, co-founders of the CDC and co-directors of the festival, had been decorated by the then president of Burkina Faso<sup>11</sup> for their contribution to artistic development in country. This recognition acknowledged that the two choreographers had brought a lot of international prestige, money, and people to the country. In fact, fulfilling the expectations of 'global art' audiences and critics, Salia Sanou and his peers have also been contributing to the international standing of president Blaise Compaoré as an international political mediator and at the same time a promoter of the arts, culture, and democratic values. Conversely, the decoration indicated that the president allowed artists to be critical – so long as this critique was not directly addressing the government in

place and remained within an aesthetic universe that is not accessible for the masses. 'Au-delà des frontières' is a piece that perfectly corresponds to these criteria.

As explained in the comprehensive documentation (dossier) of the piece that is available on the website of Salia Sanou's company, 'Au-delà des frontières' addresses the effects of current globalisation processes and asks: 'Are we really more mobile, free and near to one another?'<sup>12</sup> The piece symbolises an overcoming of boundaries on the level of the 'interdisciplinary dialogue' created on stage, but also represents a crossing of national frontiers by the international composition of the team. Its central theme are the paradoxes going along with the simultaneous increase of connectivity and interconnectedness through transportation and communication technology as well as the multiplication of boundaries and barriers that are de facto restricting the possibility of human encounters and the sensation of proximity. The aesthetic device used in the piece to engage with this topic is a mix of different artistic disciplines, represented on stage by five dancers, an actress, a musician, a tightrope walker, and a visual artist, who remained behind the stage but was present through his projections. The summary of the piece clearly states that authorship is not claimed solely by the choreographer Salia Sanou, who conceived and directed the piece, but is also regarded as belonging to the actress, the musician, and the visual artist. They form an interdisciplinary and international team composed of two Burkinabé, including the choreographer and the actress, Odile Sankara, who is responsible for the texts and the acting on stage. The musician and composer, Emmanuel Djob, was born in Cameroon, and Martin Haussmann, the visual artist, is German. There are other senior accomplished artists involved in the piece, such as the French sound creator, Hughes Germain, or the light creator, Eric Wurtz, also from France. The performers who appear in an interpreting role also have different nationalities: there is a Burkinabé, a Malian, an Italian, and a French dancer. Moreover, two tightrope walkers from France alternately perform in the piece, marking its dramatic climax when they cross a rope that is mounted across the diagonal of the stage.

Among the artists appearing on stage the most dis-

tinctive and striking presence was that of Odile Sankara. Dressed in a blazing red dress, she was not only visually set apart from the dark costumes of the other performers but also on the level of acoustics, bodily performance, and by acting on stage she stood out. She assumed the role of a commentator and was very dominant in terms of determining the symbolic dimension of the piece by its semantic meanings, even if she remained, for most of the time, at the edges of the stage. Her text and the tone of her voice were denouncing the madness of a human being who was disconnected from others and without limits. Similar to the way Mariam Pale was interacting with the dancers in 'Zouhan', she sometimes approached the other performers on stage, addressed them directly, or even picked up their movements. Parts of her text were taken up by the drawings that were projected on the back wall of the stage. Through the sophisticated projection and lightning techniques, the interaction of spoken word and the writing, which appeared as if it was done in real time by an invisible hand, appeared spectacular. Moreover, the musician, whose wireless technical equipment allowed him to move freely across the stage with his electronic guitar contributed to an impression of limitless flow.

All these elements contributed to an atmosphere of amazement that was intensified during the passages when the funambulist was performing on the rope, illustrating the thin line between balance and disequilibrium. The tension between balance and physical and mental breakdown, also present in the oscillation between control of the inner and outer body and the outburst of energy and madness, appeared like a red thread all throughout the piece. The impression left by the movements of the five dancers, often synchronised but never dialogic, was that of a restless search for connectedness. Quite in contrast to the harmonious interplay of the performers in 'Zouhan' and the emphasis of the piece on the aspect of 'renaissance', the interactions in 'Au-delà des frontières' was marked by a much more antagonistic and agonistic character. Dissimilar to the joyful mood in which 'Zouhan' is proceeding and the laughter that it is provoked among the audience, the atmosphere created by the performance of 'Au-delà des frontières' is very grave and rather

sombre. Although there are moments of almost magical interplay between different visual and acoustic elements, the dramatic script of the piece emphasises the impossibility of harmonious togetherness and the suffering of the individual from solitude. Moreover, the piece unfolds on stage without directly involving the spectator, who is rather overwhelmed by the complexity and sophistication of all of its aesthetic effects, hardly capable of capturing the full range of its symbolic meanings.

### Modes of Professionalism: Performing Arts between Literacy and Orality

In the written documentation of 'Au-delà des frontières', the theme of the frontier is elaborated upon with explicit references to the Cold War and the Berlin Wall, the frontiers traced in the same city in 1884 during the Congo Conference, or the frontiers between Africa and Europe erected in Ceuta and Melilla. The tragic fate of migrants confronting these borders and the innumerable victims of defeated rebellions against dictatorship are also evoked as a background for a general critique of political borders and their effects in terms of mental and physical barriers that stand in the way of individual freedom and the creation of community. On stage, however, this critique is transposed on a metaphorical and poetic level. The piece also evokes another political dimension that remains implicit and only becomes apparent against the background of Burkina Faso's post-revolutionary cultural and intellectual history. It is embodied by Odile Sankara, the 'voice' of the piece. Trained in literature and theatre, she is not only an outspoken artist but also a public intellectual. Sister of late Thomas Sankara, former leader of the 'popular revolution' in Burkina Faso and iconic figure for a whole generation eager of change, she is upholding the memory of her brother through the language of arts, relying on the power of the spoken word as well as on that of written texts.

In technical terms, the professionalism of Odile Sankara's art can be characterised by literacy and by the capacity to write down a script. In the piece 'Au delà des Frontières', this capacity is not only used to

fix her text but also to coordinate the music, the movements of the dancers and the funambulist, as well as to organise their interplay with the other elements of the performance, namely images, lights, and sound. The production of the piece entailed the compilation of a very comprehensive portfolio with information about the individual artists and the content of the piece, as well as a detailed technical record (*fiche technique*) where the necessary conditions for staging the piece are meticulously defined. It includes a list of the required technical devices and material infrastructure, as well as the concrete timeframe for the employment of necessary specialised staff. On the website of the company, it is made clear that on top of the financial conditions, spelled out explicitly on the last page of the document,<sup>13</sup> the thus defined technical, spatial, and temporal conditions had to be fulfilled in order to programme the piece.

As compared to 'Au delà des Frontières', the technical record of 'Zouhan' is much less complex. In terms of professionalism, the two pieces can be seen as representations of different artistic traditions: with one rooted in literate cultures, and with the other in orality. 'Au delà des Frontières' strongly relies on the capacity to produce a script where things are fixed, whereas 'Zouhan' embodies the capacity to produce an open space of interaction where things can be adapted to changing circumstances. As compared to the predictability of any presentation of the first piece, the specific quality of the latter is characterised by precisely the opposite, namely the unpredictability of human interaction with its environment. The outdoor version of 'Zouhan' especially entails a high degree of spontaneity not only regarding the reactions of the audience but also the adaptations made by the performers in order to cope with the conditions of their immediate surroundings. In this respect, the precipitated start of the premiere during the festival DDC was a telling example of how easily such a concept of performance can come in conflict or contradiction with expectations of professionalism. The incidence also illustrates that professionalism is a quality that depends on the locally and situationally specific set of cooperative relations between various people involved in the artistic work, including those

between artists and audience, as well as between artists and administrators, programmers, etc.

There is, last but not least, another aspect of professionalism that refers to a different type of collaboration, namely the relations with donors and funding agencies. In this respect, the two pieces indicate the varying economic and political dimensions and scales of transnational relations that have become a constitutive element in the art world of contemporary choreography. 'Zouhan' was produced by the company Auguste-Bienvenue and the association Wa Tid Sao, the company's representative in France. Both organisations were co-founded and directed by two young choreographers from Burkina Faso, Auguste Ouédraogo and Bienvenue Bazié. While their company is registered in Burkina Faso where Bienvenue Bazié still lives with his family, the association Wa Tid Saou was established in Bordeaux, France where Auguste Ouédraogo has his main residence together with his wife and child. These links were the basis for the transnational cooperation between various public and private organisations located on national and municipal levels in Burkina Faso, France, and the Netherlands, who co-financed the production of 'Zouhan'. While the outdoor version of 'Zouhan' was created in Burkina Faso, an indoor version was to be developed later during an artistic residency in France, where the piece has been on tour with both versions.

As mentioned above, 'Au-delà des frontières' was created in the framework of the festival Montpellier Danse in France. The piece was co-produced by the festival and the company Mouvements Perpétuels founded by Salia Sanou in 2010 in the region of Languedoc-Roussillon in France where the choreographer is residing with his family for a couple of years now and where he feels as an entire part of the local population, as he underlines on the website of his company.<sup>14</sup> After having become a member of the National Choreographic Centre in Montpellier in 1993, he has continuously sustained a framework of transnational artistic collaborations linking up French national dance centres with the CDC in Ouagadougou. Since the dissolution of the company Salia nĩ Seydou in 2011, Salia Sanou still continues to co-direct the CDC together with Seydou Boro, but has engaged in

a more individualised process of professionalisation on the level of his own company, which allows him to realise artistic projects in a more autonomous manner.

With the examples of 'Zouhan' and 'Au-delà des frontières', I am advancing the proposition that in order to assess the processes of professionalisation that go along with the globalisation of artistic practices, it is important to take note of different modes of professionalism without subsuming them under the order of a spatialised hierarchy or unidirectional evolution. Yet, in providing evidence of plurality and diversity in the domain of arts one should not refrain from critically examining the processes of selection and exclusion that go along with professionalisation and evaluating the antagonistic dynamics of openness and closure of the performance space.

## Conclusion

Contemporary art worlds are translocally and transnationally embedded urban social formations structured by economic, social, and gendered inequalities on various scales. Professionalisation creates and enforces disparities and tensions within local art scenes, especially when it comes to the conditions of knowledge transmission and the resources required for diffusing and staging artistic products. Technical infrastructure that corresponds to international standards of artistic production – including electronic devices to manage light and sound systems as well as the possibility to work without being interrupted in a space that is protected from the outside gaze and the control of the artist's environment – is not available for everybody.

There is obviously a gap between the technical level of artistic production in the global North and most countries on the African continent (with the exception of South Africa). But instead of interpreting this gap within the modernist development paradigm, it can also be perceived as a qualitative shift or discontinuity between different modes of technicality, namely between embodied techniques of dance, musical, oral, or theatrical performance on the one hand, and technicality in the sense of non-human material devices, instruments, or artefacts used in artistic

performance on the other. As ‘Zouhan’ and ‘Au-delà des frontières’ illustrate, this gap also appears between African artists, or choreographers from Burkina Faso for that case, reflecting their different individual living and working conditions and their unequal access to creative resources (Sieveking 2013). It also reflects the influence of cultural institutions and state agencies in various parts of the world, namely in France, which are shaping the contemporary dance scene in Burkina Faso.

At the same time, however, artists’ different approaches to professionalisation and their use of different modes of technicality is also the result of deliberate artistic choices. They express artists’ individual visions and ideas about the aim of professionalisation and indicate different answers to the questions of which kind of social space can or should be created and represented by artistic practice; as well as what the social position and function of an artist is about; who constitutes his or her audience; and where artistic development should lead to. These questions consider the issue of professionalism in the arts on a broader level than just the question of access to economic resources and high-tech material infrastructure.

The examples of internationally acclaimed artists such as Seydou Boro, Salia Sanou, Auguste Ouédraogo, and Bienvenue Bazié illustrate that the vision of dance as an art and a profession can be seen as a driving force for the contemporary dance movement in Africa, or Burkina Faso as was shown, endowing it with its own agency. Instead of reducing this movement to something ‘artificial’ – ‘imported by the French’ (Fau 2003: 67) – its complex and partly contradictory dynamics can be better understood when the field of contemporary dance is analysed as a space emerging from the transformation of a border-crossing movement into a locally established institution.

The protagonists of the contemporary dance scene in Ouagadougou have engaged in the creation of a global art world with a vision to gain autonomy by establishing sustainable structures for professional training on local grounds. They want to create artworks that are produced locally and circulated globally. The conditions to realise this vision depend on internal modes of functioning and organisation but

also on the support of national and international institutions that provide the necessary infrastructure and financial requirements, which indicate the limits of self-organisation. However, through their collaborative interactions they have created a local artistic neighbourhood, connected to and shaped by translocal and transnational processes but not predetermined by a ‘global’ context imposed from somewhere ‘outside’ or ‘above’. Processes of professionalisation, while contributing to standardisation and homogenisation, also promote a diversification of this local artistic neighbourhood and to its specific ways of generating the context in which contemporary choreography acquires meaning. The stories of how the new generation of professionally trained artists from this neighbourhood will inscribe their own visions in the world of contemporary dance still remain to be written.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> ‘Danse contemporaine, ça veut rien dire aujourd’hui. Il n’y a rien de fixé. C’est à toi de décider. [...] Il n’y a pas une seule vérité, la vérité c’est la formation. [...] Il faut se former, il y a cette vérité-là. [...] Se former, ça c’est nécessaire. Mais au niveau de la création, il n’y a pas de vérité. [...] Chaque personne a sa danse à inventer. Donc du coup, il n’y a que des milliers de danses, des milliers de spectacle qui existent.’

<sup>2</sup> Appadurai (1996: 178 f.) uses the term neighbourhood ‘to refer to the actually existing social forms in which locality, as a dimension or value, is variably realised. Neighborhoods, in this usage, are situated communities characterised by their actuality, whether spatial or virtual, and their potential for reproduction’.

<sup>3</sup> Andrieu (2010a, 2010b, 2012) has examined the influence of national politics and institutions in the transformation of the performing art field in Burkina Faso with a special focus on dance, where professionalisation processes have been decisively influenced by ‘traveling models’ of cultural nation-building such as national art academies, the national ballet, or the national week of culture. In order to understand the significance of national institutions and politics in the evolution of ‘modern’ and ‘contemporary’ visual art

fields in West Africa the studies of Kasfir (1999: 166–189), who compares post-colonial artistic nationalism in Senegal and Nigeria, Oguibe (2002), who focuses on Nigeria, and Harney (2004) who examines the governmentality of the visual art field in Senegal, are particularly instructive.

<sup>4</sup> <http://shiftafrica.wordpress.com/category/history-of-contemporary-african-dance/> ; accessed 11 November 2014.

<sup>5</sup> The French journal and internet platform *Africultures* (<http://www.africultures.com/php/>) has fulfilled important functions in terms of professionalisation, namely providing a database of a large number of artists and art institutions on the continent as well a platform for engaged art journalism, offering different formats for documentation and critique by activists and scholars.

<sup>6</sup> In the meantime the event has been renamed *Danse l'Afrique Danse*. It was conceived as an itinerant contemporary dance competition, organised for the first time in 1995 in Luanda, Angola (Amselle 2005: 147–149; Sanou 2008: 42–47). Since 2012 the competitive element was abandoned and a new agenda adopted, which explicitly conceives of the event as a 'market' (Neveu Kringelbach 2013: 151–152).

<sup>7</sup> The integral video of the outdoor version of 'Zouhan' as performed during the festival *Dialogues de Corps* 2012 can be accessed following the link <http://vimeo.com/79660415> and using the password 'zouhan13'. A montage of 10 minutes, cutting together selected takes from 'Au-delà des frontières' is available on the website of Salia Sanou's company : <http://www.saliasanou.net/mouvements-perpetuels/les-spectacles/au-dela-des-frontieres>.

<sup>8</sup> 'Renaissance, réjouissance, initiation et transmission sont au rendez-vous.' [http://static.blog4ever.com/2008/01/171300/ZOUHAN\\_Dossier-de-pre-sentation-04-06-2014.pdf](http://static.blog4ever.com/2008/01/171300/ZOUHAN_Dossier-de-pre-sentation-04-06-2014.pdf), accessed 11 November 2014.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.compagniekpg.net/>, accessed 11 November 2014.

<sup>10</sup> Expressing herself in Dioula, the semantic meaning of her speech and songs was not understood by the international audience present at the festival *Dialogues de Corps* nor by all of the participants from Burkina Faso, where the majority of population

speaks Moore.

<sup>11</sup> Long-term president Blaise Compaoré had come to power in a coup in 1987 in which his predecessor, former friend and confidant Thomas Sankara was killed. In October 2014 a popular uprising against his attempt to change the constitution so that he could be reelected again in 2015 forced Compaoré to step down from office.

<sup>12</sup> 'Sommes-nous pour autant plus mobile, plus libre, plus proche, les uns des autres, les uns avec les autres?' <http://www.saliasanou.net/mouvements-perpetuels/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Au-dela-des-frontieres.pdf>, accessed 11 November 2014, page 3.

<sup>13</sup> The costs include the allowances for 12 artists on tour plus a lump sum specified according to the number of performances to be programmed: one performance 8.500,- Euros, 2 performances 15.500,- Euros, 3 performances 22.000,- Euros.

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.saliasanou.net/mouvements-perpetuels/compagnie/historique>, accessed 11 November 2014.

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