

**Andréya Ouamba & Matthias Sperling:
Skype Dialogue following completion of Diplomacy II collaboration,
22/01/10
Questions by Eckhard Thiemann**

1. Your first encounter was at Woking Dance Festival in March 2007, when you had 2 days studio-time with two other dancers for experimentation through improvisation. What attracted you to each other's way of moving? What encouraged you to continue a dialogue?

A: When I look back on the first performance we presented [at the Dance Migration conference], what interested me was how Matthias worked with his body, doing small things but things that resonated in space. They were small things, but things that said a lot and that really inscribed themselves in the space and in the moment. When I compare with Laila, although it's absolutely not possible to make a judgement about someone after such a short encounter, I found her to be a very good dancer, but almost too good a dancer, if that makes sense. That's the complicated thing - in what we did, she seemed to do things too well, as if the things she was doing were already done, had already been worked, as if there was no room for surprises, and that's not what I look for when working in a laboratory situation. Even if it's the right thing, it's something that has already arrived previously, rather than something that is arriving right now. Everything appeared well prepared in advance.

M: I found you extremely spontaneous and fast, I guess for me that's a kind of physical intelligence that I really enjoy being challenged to try to respond to and keep up with. I was excited by the way that you always made a lot happen, you always made new events appear, always with a very clear intention and a great deal of engagement. You bring out new events very rapidly and you immediately go quite far in the direction of that new event. I liked that a lot. It wasn't just your movement that I liked, but something about your way of making propositions about your relation to others. That's something that we spoke about when we did Diplomacy at the Lightbox, where the installation focused on a game of relations with the passing public. Both there, and at the Dance migration conference, I remember you always made very direct encounters happen between you and members of the audience, and that's something I really like. It's something I think is very important for dance and it's easy to forget or avoid.

A: That's true and it helps. I watched the video of Diplomacy II, and I saw that this thinking in terms of relations helped us to also integrate things that we might do in the street into this 'dancer body' that we have, and I think that's good. In the beginning, I also liked that you had interesting ideas about your own work, like the solo you told me you were working on.

I had an experience in Seoul, working with Kyeong-Eun Lee and a French woman who worked for a long time with Maguy Marin. She talked so much, asking "but what about this, what is the idea of that" for hours and hours. Finally I said, let's try to do with our body and listen to what the body says in relation to these

questions. We got moving very late in the process, but that's what permitted us to finally construct a good piece.

I find it very interesting and we don't often talk about this, but there is a way in which we can sometimes unconsciously solve intellectual questions very quickly by using the body. If you talk for a while about a subject and then start to use your body, then, although you don't decide to work on that subject, it follows you because you are surrounded by that energy. Finally the body does nothing other than respond to that subject, even though you weren't intending for that to happen and may not have thought it possible.

M: Perhaps it has been a good thing for us, in one sense, that we have never had much time for our collaborative projects. Each time, we have basically just started dancing together straight away and done our research through that path of doing.

2. Coming from very different movement traditions, what draws you both to improvisation?

M: This makes me think again of the American choreographer Deborah Hay, and the way that her work doesn't rely on predetermined movement (so it immediately seems to fall into the category of improvisation) but she very clearly says that her work is categorically not improvisation but choreography. Sometimes I'm not so interested in thinking about what we do together as improvisation. It's not so important to me to affix this label of 'improvisation' to what we do. We are doing choreographic work, and it is just dance. There is a consciously spontaneous engagement in our practice together, but I don't think that makes it necessary to label our practice as improvisation. Sometimes that strikes me as unhelpful or inaccurate in some way.

A: I agree, what you say is very interesting. In fact, the improvisation happens in the studio, when you prepare the tools that you will use in performance. In performance, you have had the time to understand things already, to realize things, to measure things. When you arrive onstage, in fact, it's not improvisation anymore. This is what I explained to the dancers in Brazzaville [where I have just been working]: improvisation becomes a practice that permits you to understand how to make an instantaneous composition. That takes time because a dancer who doesn't have experience with improvisation, even if they are a very good dancer, if you ask them to perform improvisation, they will just do any old thing and they will tire themselves out within ten minutes. But when you want to present a performance that is 20 minutes long, without making it a piece that is completely written, in fact, you are not improvising. You are just realising the experience that you have of the stage, the space, your body and what is in front of you. You are just reproducing that experience that you already have. In Brazzaville, we had rehearsals and then when we came to the performance, those dancers – oh la la, they really danced. They did many beautiful things, but the next day I had to tell them, you forgot to manage your space, you forgot to manage your time, you forgot to manage your music. When

I danced an improvised solo in Brazzaville as part of the performance, people thought it was a piece that I had written long before, they didn't believe that it was improvised for the first time. They thought it was a piece that existed.

M: And in that moment, it did exist.

A: Yes, it did. Because it's that experience that you bring with you of the space, of your body, of your choreographic writing, of your use of time, and all of those things. So in the end, it's not really improvisation.

As the saying goes, an archeologist is never improvising when he does his research. Yes, he doesn't know what he'll find, but he is not improvising. He arrives, he sees the landscape, evaluates it, and decides what he will do and where he will dig. As a function of his experience, as a result of his experience.

M: Absolutely. And I think a lot also follows from the simple acknowledgement of the fact that every time we perform a piece, it will be different – we are different, it's a different experience, a different moment. It's just about having the capability of integrating that awareness into a performance.

A: Today we met with teachers at the École Franco-Sénégalais here in Dakar. Each year, they have to choreograph end-of-year performances with their students and we're going to do workshops with the teachers to help them feel more confident about their skills to do this. They say they get to a certain point and then they get stuck, they don't know what to do. And when I mention improvisation, they say 'no no, it's much too hard'. So I try to tell them improvisation is a practice that you put in place, that you understand well what you are going to do. Like a teacher who prepares his lesson and goes into the classroom not knowing what questions his students will ask. He is able to respond to all of those eventualities because of his experience, even if the students ask questions that he wasn't expecting. And that is improvisation, but it is never usually called improvisation in those sorts of contexts. Improvisation is a practice that you put into place, that you understand, that permits you to understand your body, your reactions, how you can transform things, how you can respond.

M: It's great that you're working with the schools in Dakar.

3. Can improvisation be culturally 'neutral'?

A: For me, improvisation is not neutral. Improvisation is our meeting point. It is improvisation that permits us, in the end, to have a real encounter. If we worked without improvisation, in more conventional types of structures, it would take us much more time to find a solution. But when we are in the practice of improvisation, there are things to which we are able to respond quite quickly, quite easily.

M: It's also something about the fact that, with improvisation, our negotiation with one another is happening in the moment, and that allows us to meet, to be

involved in the same activity.

4. When you worked together in the studio how did you negotiate your different practices. How did you find common ground?

A: I think it comes from the trust that, once it becomes established in a collaboration, gives access to many things. After that, if one person feels like they don't understand what the other is up to, they say to themselves 'ok, I'll go with it and see where this takes us', because that trust is there.

M: That a very interesting idea – it makes me wonder how that trust became established between us, because I think it was there quite immediately.

A: Yes, I think it has to do with an openness to having an encounter, a curiosity. I saw in you a desire to discover, to know. We had that day while I was in London for the Barbican shows, where we just met in the studio to see what happened. To do that, each of us had to pass over things that we questioned, but we said ok let's see.

M: Yes. Maybe the most basic way that we found common ground was simply by dancing together, by engaging and working out our negotiation through our 'physical thinking'.

A: Yes, I remember when we met that day in the studio, when I was at the Barbican, we said 'right, we have no idea or structure for what we're going to do, we're just going to dance and see what happens'. That is something that already puts us in a state of trust, in an openness to a dialogue, without any pretension.

M: The other thing I find important to mention is how much that common territory between us has grown, the more time we have been able to spend together. Yes, having that openness to start out with is crucial, but then that shared territory is always in the process of expanding.

A: Yes, that territory expanded by spending time together. When I was ill, you came to the hotel, you took me to the pharmacy, or we went for a drink, we introduce each other to our friends, all of that enters into the story. It adds to your understanding of the person you are working with and that gives a flexibility to the work. Reggie Wilson for instance, I remember one time in New Mexico, he got out all these pictures of his entire family, his grandfather, his brother, his mother and father, and all of that helps us to enter into each others' lives. It doesn't happen in every case, but it helps to open more doors in a collaboration.

M: Yes. As I wrote in my report about my trip to Dakar, I think that my experience there became an important part of the content of our duet.

A: (laughs)

M: And the fact that I could meet all the people around you in Ouakam and see how life works in Dakar, all of that added so much to my understanding that I couldn't possibly have imagined before being there myself. I find that so important. Even now, sitting here and talking to you on skype, both of us have actually sat there, on the other side of this conversation. I know what it feels like to be in your flat, I know what it looks like on the road outside, and you've been here too in our place, you've met the cat. It's not just an abstract thing, we've each been in the others' space.

A: Yes, it doesn't happen every time, but when I meet someone like you or like Reggie, I want to introduce them to the other people in my life too. I say 'oh you have to meet this guy' – my friend Antoine in New York is waiting to meet you now. My life is always like that. All of the people who penetrated into my life somehow, who I passed a moment with, I want to also give those people to others. So it continues with other people, when it works well.

5. You have by now both visited each other's country and taken part in choreographic developments, workshops, performances. Can you discuss a bit of your perceptions of each other's working environments. What did surprise you? What was familiar? What was strange? What was difficult? How has the knowledge of each other's environment influenced the next stage of your collaboration?

A: There is a lot to say about that. I tried, unsuccessfully I think, to say this in the post-performance talks with Reggie in the USA, but we don't have the same culture of art here as in occident, the same artistic culture, in the sense of the level of artistic education in the society.

M: When I was in Dakar, it was so striking how little infrastructure for dance you have there. It made me realise how much we have here in the UK, in terms of studios, theatres, organizations etc. Don't you think that education and infrastructure have to go together?

A: Yes, that's true too. Infrastructure can also include a certain education of one's art. But when I speak of artistic education I mean what we see each day in performance, theatre, installation, sculpture, everything that we are exposed to. And if an artist has only ever travelled in Africa, has never been in the occident, there are many things that he has never encountered. He may be intelligent, he may have a very good artistic philosophy, but he doesn't have the same education. Because, for example, for a dancer here, he cannot imagine that there may be such a thing as a performance where the dancers are naked, but you have seen that. He cannot imagine that you can include in a dance performance things like ...an apartment building, but you have seen that done. It's a different culture, artistically speaking. He will have learned things in art school, but he will not have seen them actually done. What he learns in school is not what he sees around him. And there will be gaps in what he learns through one curriculum, one summary of art history. I can gain some of that education because I have the opportunity to travel to show my work, and to see

other performances when I'm there. So I begin to have a wider outlook. So someone here cannot have that exposure, even if they are very intelligent and talented, whereas people, even in different parts of the occident, can share the same artistic education by being exposed to the same things.

M: But I find that, on the other hand, things can also become very boring if everyone has the same artistic education.

A: That's a beautiful thing, luckily! When I say luckily, I want to point out these things because... when I went to Seoul, for example, I saw what they are doing there and I thought this is what they were doing in France 50 years ago. Even though, in Korea, they have access to the same artistic education as in France, I can come from Dakar and say - that's passé, what's that? So it's just to say, it's good also to notice that there is a diversity that can come with a shared artistic education.

M: Yes. But, with what you say about education, I also think that when an artistic education becomes very fixed, it can have the effect of separating art from life, and I find that very dangerous.

A: Yes, we cannot ignore the different things that are around our lives. Art, after all, is simply part of our lives. Unconsciously, we choose different angles to present our performances, what becomes contemporary dance, or what becomes scientific propositions. Certain people will have a different outlook. When, as a choreographer or director or musician, you start to go in a direction that your society doesn't understand, people start to say 'he's lost'. But what the society isn't capable of understanding is that what this person is doing is simply drawing from the life that we have, but from different angles. Normally, we walk with our feet on the ground and our head up, but this guy has imagined we could walk with our feet in the air and our head down -and people say he's lost it, but he's just reversed something.

6.You chose the term Diplomacy for your projects. How diplomatic can dance be?

A: Everything in life is diplomacy! At home, in a couple...it's true, life is entirely made of that. Today [in the current round of Aex Corps workshops] we spoke about independence. Independence is in everything, but can you really live independently, in the true sense of the word?

M:No

A: Absolutely, it doesn't exist, we are always dependent on other things.

M: I think the other point about diplomacy in our work is that dance can be infinitely diplomatic and our aim was, in fact, to go beyond diplomacy, to arrive at more unmediated communication.

A: Yes, but it's through a kind of diplomacy that you are forming that thought itself. It's always necessary to have good diplomacy to do certain things.

M: Yes, that's true too.

7. In your choreographic dialogue, how do you circumvent the danger of levelling out, of making shallow compromises and bland fusion?

M: I would say by never trying to become the same. We always left space for each of us to do a particular thing in our own way, to keep our own 'démarche'.

A: Yes, that's clear, we were each able to remain ourselves within an ensemble. That's something I like very much, that each person can remain themselves. But I also think that without compromise, we cannot arrive at doing anything, in fact.

M: Yes, I understand that sense as well.

A: When there is disagreement, if each person just stands their ground, there is blockage and there can be no progress. Someone has to compromise.

M: Yes, but it's also important to choose your compromises well.

A: For me, for example, the idea of performing our duet in the circle was not so easy to accept at first, but I thought, let's see where this goes and in the end it worked. Even if the circle was still too small!

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