Narrating Urban Acupuncture[s]

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Abstract: Cities like Accra or Kinshasa, Kumasi or Kisangani, can – despite all large-scale transformations – still be characterized by the presence of small-scale appropriations of urban space. These 'points' / 'waypoints' / 'acupuncture points' exist in time and space. They operate relationally and reactively, and induce radiating effects with minimal gestures. Thereby, they create networks of characteristic energy levels with catalytic effects on the urban fabric. Primarily of a commercial nature, they are located in the programmatic field between production and consumption.

Artists and architects increasingly conceptualize and apply corresponding strategies, not for commercial purposes, but in order to generate new social and artistic space(s). They either leave behind the institutional framework for political, economic, and ideological reasons, or create a new framework where there has been no place for (contemporary) art and urban culture thus far. By means of (mostly small-scale) spatial, temporal, and programmatic interventions, urban space is activated and transformed. Urban actors – artists, audiences, and residents, respectively – are stimulated and empowered to experience and reflect their city differently.

Negotiations on urban space and urban culture of this kind can have a lasting impact on both a discursive and physical level. Due to their contextual and net-like nature, they can even be read as tools for creating new platforms and hybrids of local and translocal activities. These approaches can also take dynamic phenomena into account, which is so relevant to capturing the essence of the African city – and which architecture, in the conventional sense, as well as the Western model of the art institution, can hardly accomplish.

This presentation will not have the format of an academic paper; it is rather navigation through and narration of imagined, existing, and future **urban acupuncture[s]**. The focus will be on the analysis of the work of Studios Kabako / Faustin Linyekula in Kisangani, DR Congo.

Keywords: African city; arts; Kisangani; Kumasi; small scale architecture; Studios Kabako; urban acupuncture.

POINT OF DEPARTURE

I met choreographer Faustin Linyekula for an interview in 2006, after having seen his performance, 'The Dialogue Series: iii. Dinozord', performed on one of Vienna's theatre stages. I wanted to know more about his perception and conception of space as a performing artist, the time-space relations in his work, as well as the meanings and naming of spatial concepts in his mother tongues, Swahili and Lingala. He also described some major characteristics of urban space and its appropriations in Kinshasa and in his hometown Kisangani.

When we met for the second time in Vienna, half a year later, to continue our conversation, he talked about his vision of creating cultural centres in Kisangani, not just one, but three, spread throughout the city. I was excited by this plan as, five years before, I had imagined a project for the city of Kumasi in Ghana, based on the idea of creating six to eleven 'spaces for communication', spread throughout the city like acupuncture points, and related to each other by invisible traces.

Why acupuncturing the city? Why art? Why spaces for art and urban culture?

PROLOGUE

Cities are among the most complex organizational entities we know of. Cities are fields of dynamic forces – cultural, socioeconomic organisms and heterogeneous, multilayered systems that are constantly changing. "Cohabitation, with all its conveniences and accompanied by all its struggles, has for centuries been the main purpose of the construction of cities" (Weizman 2008). Every city has its own characteristics which are apprehended on the basis of the quantitative, qualitative, and emotional intensity of the inhabitant's activities, and draw on cultural imprints and other identity-forming elements.

> Cities are organized primarily around flows that are the main reason why they exist: Cities are places of exchange where people, services, and goods are collected and distributed in a multitude of flows. […] This also shows a predominantly liquid nature of urbanity that is characterized more by the processes than by the territory they organize and are organized by at the same time. (Zettl 2007)

Cities like Accra or Kinshasa, Kumasi or Kisangani – despite all the large-scale transformations of their physical body - can be characterized by the intense and visible presence of such flows. Engaged in commercial or social activity, urban actors create multifaceted networks that are in constant interaction with each other – with the objects of trade or consumption – and with the city's physical structure.

The vectors in this net, waypoints in this field, or acupuncture points in this organism called a city – however one prefers to conceptualize it – often manifest themselves spatially in the form of small-scale appropriations of urban space. Examples of this can include the girl with a bowl full of plantain chips on one of Accra's highways during the afternoon rush hour, a parasol/table mobile phone card shop installed next to a church on Sundays in central Kumasi, the boy with an icebox on a plastic chair full of not-so-cool *sucre* next to the entrance of the Académie des Beaux Arts in Kinshasa – these 'waypoints' or 'acupuncture points' operate in time and space, relationally and reactively, and induce radiating effects with minimal gestures.

Acupuncture by its very definition is a technique where fine needles are inserted at special points on the body and manipulated to relieve pain or for therapeutic purposes. Traditional Chinese medical theory has it that acupuncture points are situated on meridians along which *qi*, vital energy, flows.

> Each juncture has its own flavour, and thus its own unique ability to affect the meridian and the terrain of the body as a whole. It is the job of the acupuncturist, not just to memorize where each point lies, but to become intimately acquainted with the spirit of the point. It is only then that he or she can call on the point for specific and appropriate help in transforming the energy that sustains and determines the physical body. (Sax 2009)

ACUPUNCTURING THE CITY

Having analysed the city of Kumasi (2000-2002/2007) at that moment in history when Rem Koolhaas presented his view on Lagos to the world and Philippe de Boeck found a language to describe his Kinshasa, my specific description of spatial articulations in the capital of Ghana's Ashanti Region had been the following: the designation of structures as static or dynamic, permanent or temporary, formal or informal, becomes obsolete. The sharp division into private and public domains, and the clear distinction between interior and exterior space, are not suitable anymore. The organisation and conception of space relies much more on nuances than on polarities, moving through the spectrum between the poles. Mono-functional space is hardly to be found, multi-programmed spaces, places, and fields prevail. Instead of restrictive mechanisms, the organisational and physical framework is of a more elastic, permeable, decentralized, and net-like nature.[1]

The question was if it would be possible to translate these time-space-related urban phenomena and their network qualities into a planning strategy or design process, and if so, how.

The project, 'listening kumasi', was an attempt to translate the above described findings into an architectural project, to read the city from within, to intervene actively, and to imagine space-generating strategies. The project can be subsumed under 'urban acupuncture': It was based on the concept of representing a variety of Kumasi's spatial, cultural, and social characteristics through a subjective selection of striking urban points and fields. They were read as micro-systems of characteristic energy levels with catalytic effects on the urban fabric. In this sense, they were interpreted as dormant potentials. Activities and actors were examined and their levels of activities were described. A temporary intervention on a 1:1 scale was installed as a testing project: for a short

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1   This observation – also transferable to other cities such as Accra – was clearly focused on 'open space', on the inner city, and, in the case of residential neighbourhoods, the more informal ones.

period, one square metre of red fabric – as a space-generating tool, metric system, and ex-territorial architectonic space - was implemented at each point and field. In addition to spatial facts, cultural and social behaviour became perceivable, and short-term spaces of communication were revealed.

FIGURE 1: *listening kumasi*: Performative intervention Central Market Kumasi, 2002, © Bärbel Müller

Subsequently, six of the eleven locations were read as 'sites' for intervention. Topics were assigned which helped to characterize the chosen locations to a certain extent and allowed spatial concepts for specific interventions to develop: authenticity, migration, post-colonialism, transformation, hybridity, interpretation, space, appropriation, improvisation, rhythm and motion. Participatory, programmatic, physical, and acoustic spaces were designed. Three types of space-generating strategies were applied: the revitalization of abandoned structures, the creation of new, permanent structures, and the creation of temporary or ephemeral spaces – all with the aim of creating radiating and healing effects on the respective contexts as well as on the entire city.

Soon after Faustin Linyekula, as an artist, and I, as an architect, identified our mutual interest in the conception and production of decentralized spaces for art and urban culture dispersed throughout a city, Studios Kabako invited me to visit the city of Kisangani and to begin collaborating on 'acupuncturing' Kisangani, the third largest city of the Democratic Republic of Congo and capital of the North-Eastern Province Orientale.
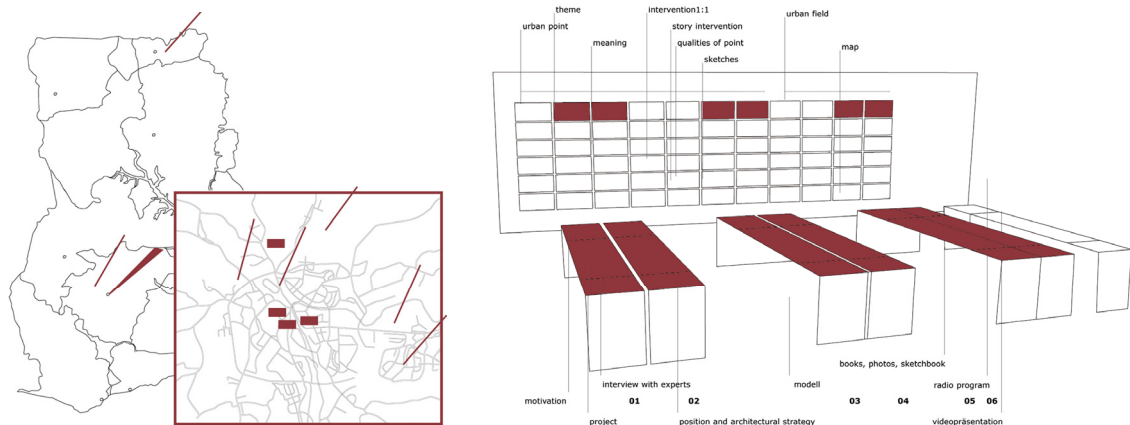

FIGURE 2: *listening kumasi*: 7 urban points and 4 urban fields, Bärbel Müller 2002

Kisangani is a village and a city at the same time, embedded into an endless forest, held by two rivers. It is a beauty, rich of green, which is greener than anywhere else; clean air, red earth, the presence of water. There is a pervasive silence which, on the one hand, seems peaceful, but on the other, feels like the aftermath of a traumatizing experience, which was a war. Characterized by scars and decay: the city is an aged beauty, but at the same time, seems very young and at the beginning of a new era.

FIGURE 3: Kisangani: impressions, © Bärbel Müller

The people of Kisangani seem curious, interested, sometimes exhausted by the burden of their daily life, self-conscious, sometimes shy. They swoon over the power of politics and the (assumed) omnipresence or impotence of certain political figures. They are afraid of death: the sudden death of their children, brothers, or sisters. Young people are very awake, demanding, and passionate, hungry to learn and to express themselves. They also have Kinshasa in mind. The children are gorgeous and innocent, as children always are.

What else characterizes the city at first glance? The movements of people - walking, cycling, carrying goods; the flow of the two rivers embracing the city, silent and powerful at the same time; the strong presence of history or a plurality of histories which define(s) the identity/ identities of the city: all have left their explicit physical and mental traces.

FIGURE 4: Kisangani: vernacular, Belgian-colonial, Modernistic and contemporary structures, © Bärbel Müller

The urbanscape of Kisangani narrates all these histories, which are physically reflected in its architecture(s), but also in the scale of planning: the urban fabric of each district speaks its own language, and each district is dominated by another building typology. Traditional pre-colonial architecture exists next to Belgian colonial structures, next to Modernistic, more vertical building ensembles that accommodate the university, institutions, offices, or settlements. Vernacular and informal small-scale housing dominates certain parts of the city and its edges. Contemporary constructions which can be found in the inner city and the 'better' neighbourhoods mostly lack any readable typology, but are the physical manifestation of the prosperity of their owners. The overall city can be described as the assemblage of all these elements, which exist next to each other, overlap, or create interesting hybrids.

> Kisangani is also "the capital of diamonds"…"the UN-MONUC"…"the *tolekas*" (bicycle taxis)…"a train station which does not function"…"a university with 4000-5000 students who will not find work after graduating"…"a moribund French Cultural Centre which survives by renting its theatre space and which maintains the only library of Kisangani, which is the only cultural infrastructure of the city besides the Ngoma space, which is dedicated to theater"…And "there is another city, which Faustin [Linyekula] has seen growing"…"*un reve un peu fou*" (Dypray 2009)

What does this other city look like? How does Studios Kabako envision Kisangani?

One day, Kisangani will be the cultural capital of the DR Congo. There will be a network of spaces for art, "spaces of possibility where it is possible to dream" (Linyekula 2009). And there will be local artists who make their living from their art.

> The Kisangani I dream of is one where it would be still possible to live without any inferiority complex [due to] the fact that we are not Kinshasa; one where there would be as many centres as there are people who care to dream about the city, who ask themselves questions; and one where the forest and the water would still have a certain rhythm. (Linyekula 2009)

After spending eight years (1993-2001) in exile, Faustin Linyekula returned to the Congo with the desire to create art there. In Kinshasa, he founded Studio Kabako, his company for performing arts. Five years later, he decided to relocate Studio Kabako to his hometown, Kisangani, where "he began a process of creative healing in a country [and a city] that had been devastated by colonialism, genocide, and war" (Scott 2008).

He and his partner, Virginie Dupray, Studios Kabako's manager, spend as much time of the year as they can – and all their energy – in the city. Here, Studio Kabako became Studios Kabako and is still expanding: Studios Kabako is much more than a dance and theatre company now, it is a lifelong project which operates on many levels. First, it is the company itself which produces (and performs) most of its pieces in Kisangani. Secondly, it has become a small-scale entity for artistic education and exchange which conducts an ongoing series of workshops for Kisangani's young generation, led by invited local, national, and international artists, or Faustin Linyekula and Virginie Dupray themselves. Thirdly, Studios Kabako is and will become a physical space dedicated to art and communal work, with three cultural centres spread throughout the city. The vision for Kisangani is manifold and affects urban, environmental, social, political, artistic, programmatic, and spatial aspects all at the same time, based on the desire to establish a network of energetic points with transformative potential for the city and its inhabitants.

The concept of decentralization is essential towards understanding how Studios Kabako operates on all levels – from its choreographic details in staged dance and theatre pieces, to its strategic plans for urban appropriations. Even the question of "why Kisangani, not Kinshasa?", aside from personal reasons, is argued for with the strong conviction of contributing to the decentralization of cultural life and the Congolese art scene, which, until now, has been focused on Kinshasa (and towards Europe), in order to bring back the focus to one of the province cities of the Congo.

FIGURE 5: Kisangani map based on Google Earth, Image © 2009 TerraMetrics, Image © 2009 DigitalGlobe © 2009 Google, © 2009, and: acupuncturing the city

This move to Kisangani also evoked the need to occupy, organise and shape physical space. In Kinshasa, Studios Kabako – which originally "was meant to be a mental space" (Linyekula 2009) – was located in the French Cultural Centre. But in Kisangani, the question of a physical space became an important topic. In the

beginning, Studios Kabako rented the only existing theatre hall in the city centre of Kisangani, but soon realised that working there was problematic: "If you have a big dream and the container is fairly antagonistic, it will just kill the dream" (Linyekula 2009).

THREE CROSS-LINKED CULTURAL CENTRES FOR KISANGANI

There has not only been the question of how to house Studios Kabako's own productions, but also the question of how to house its overall program. The conceptual background involves applying the policy of decentralization and diffusion – not only on a global, national, and artistic level, but also on an urban level. "Everyone has a right to culture" (Linyekula 2009). Therefore, Studios Kabako is devoted to the diversification of its activities, which is also a response to the cultural infrastructure that is missing in the city: to activate different districts and thereby reach different communities, even the unprivileged ones. The goal is to create a network of spaces, as opposed to just one monolithic centre. These dispersed centres can act on the city like acupuncture: when you connect the dots, you begin healing or appeasing the 'body'. Further the flow, and the circulation of participants, audiences, actions and projects is secured.

> Perhaps the whole idea of 'centre' needs to be rethought, from a very centralizing and monolithic look, to a more postmodern thing where, like even in contemporary dance, one would say the centre is not the fixed point in the middle of the physical space, but the centre is actually inside each dancer. So you have as many centres as there are performers. And the centres are always shifting. And so it becomes a dialogue between being in the physical centre, the fixed physical point in the space, the centre of the space, and going back to your own centre. (Linyekula 2009)

Each of the three imagined cultural centres is understood as infrastructure, as material body, as social space, as gesture and paradigm for the community in which it is embedded, and from where it is radiating:

In *Makiso*, the administrative and economic centre of Kisangani, the representational aspects of Studio Kabako will converge, both on a programmatic and on an architectonic level. It is the place for showing work, it is meant to be a stage that communicates with the city and the outer world, a space that is open to the city and allows the city to come in. Events, concerts, and projections shall take place. This centre is designed to become the landmark of Studios Kabako, the sign leading into the city, which is reflected in its architecture.

FIGURE 6:   Studios Kabako Makiso: design for a small performance centre, architect: Bärbel Müller

A second centre is located in the eastern district of *Simi Simi*, close to the Congo River. Here, Studio Kabako has acquired a 3000-square-meter piece of land. The future centre is conceived as a space for exchanges between individuals from diverse disciplines: artists, philosophers, playwrights, actors, choreographers, dancers, musicians, scientists, etc. It accommodates arts residencies and studios for rehearsals, recording and editing, and is embedded in green. The aim is to provide a multidisciplinary environment for experimenting, attracting individual artists to research and work in a concentrated manner without distraction, a 'bubble-like' space "where one can close doors" (Linyekula 2009).

The third centre is placed in *Lubunga*, the most populated district of Kisangani, and the only one situated on the left bank of the Congo River. There is a strong desire to reach the periphery here, as Lubunga lacks all kinds of infrastructure, seems to have been forgotten by the city council, and requires perspective for transformation.

Studios Kabako is intending to work with selected groups of inhabitants in this community, privileging the idea that change and development should occur internally. The ambition is to foster socio-political, intellectual, and artistic production through a program of workshops, meetings, projections, and more. Art here is meant to serve as "a bridge to talk about other things that are there around us" (Linyekula 2009). The spatial scheme is meant to revitalize an abandoned colonial structure.

FIGURE 7: Studios Kabako Simi Simi: panorama view of the site, 2009, © Bärbel Müller

In each of these three urban situations, change through artistic practice shall be achieved, which is reflected in spatial interventions and architecture of limited scale. Here – as it has also been conceptualized in the project *listening kumasi* – the revitalization of abandoned structures, the construction of new, permanent structures, and the creation of temporary or ephemeral spaces are envisioned. 'Entering into public space and trying to re-imagine how we share that space, but with our language', is how Studios Kabako describes its objective, with a context-specific degree of openness and privacy. To avoid concentrating the project in one location is also a strategy for securing a sense of temporality while still having the advantage of working in fixed spaces. The possibility and necessity of rotating and moving from one location to the other offers the opportunity to work on different schedules at the same time: elaborated projects and more spontaneous initiatives can take place all at once, influencing each other and creating synergetic effects.

Studio Kabako's commitment to the creation of the above-described environment(s) in – and for – Kisangani is bold. Therefore, the question of financial resources is an important and challenging one. In the context of a city unable to respond to basic needs, economic means for art and urban culture simply do not exist. At present, Faustin Linyekula – dancer, choreographer, director, native of Kisangani – performs, tours, and teaches all over the world, financing Studios Kabako's work in Kisangani through his international career. "I sit with the irony that my inspiration comes from Africa, but the money to continue comes from performing in Europe […]" (Linyekula 2009). This current mode of financing and funding from outside is not intended to be the long-term approach: a more self-sufficient type of financial approach is inscribed in Studios Kabako's network conception, including the realization of its future physical spaces/centres, as well as the conception of ongoing workshops, the support of local artistic productions, and economic strategies for sustaining an emerging art scene in the long term.

MORE, MORE FUTURE KISANGANI!

Not having stable working conditions in Kisangani has thus far allowed Studios Kabako to constantly evaluate its programmatic and spatial positioning there, and to test existing urban, politic, economic, and social parameters. As long as the centres are not built – which in any case is meant to be a long-term process – Studios Kabako operates with "a more survival-like approach of space" (Linyekula 2009). For a period of time, an office, a house, and a church-owned hall have been rented in one of Kisangani's neighbourhoods, serving as workshop, administration, rehearsal, or recording space. And, from time to time, the city itself becomes the stage.

This more performative, less architecture-oriented strategy of 'acupuncturing' the city demonstrates the potential of using the arts as a starting point for communicating to the city on a larger scale, and building up personal networks. "Reflection and development should begin with the arts because art is that space where we attempt to identify our fears, our hopes, and our dreams" and "exactly art […] cannot be a space to forget about what hurts" (Linyekula 2009). The exploration of the role, responsibility, and integrity of art and the artist in Congolese society is what Faustin Linyekula cares about. To search for, educate, and work with a new generation of people in Kisangani who "have made a commitment to becoming professional artists" (Linyekula 2009), as well as to collaborate with already celebrated (mostly Congolese) artists, has generated a new network of local and translocal activities. This network can be characterized by openness towards and inclusiveness of the public, establishing interaction between disconnected territories in society.

FIGURE 8: Studios Kabako film workshop 2008 in a rented space, © Bärbel Müller / rehearsal of the piece *more more more… future* in the living room of a rented house, © Martin C. Hess

FIGURE 9: Studios Kabako: rehearsals of the piece *more more more… future* with audience participation, © Bärbel Müller

FIGURE 10: Studios Kabako: rehearsals and performance of the piece *more more more… future* in the KVS Theater in Brussels / © Bärbel Müller / © Martin C. Hess

FIGURE 11: Studios Kabako: stage set-up in Bandal, Kinshasa, and a performance of the piece *more more more… future* in the French Cultural Centre in Kinshasa / © Studios Kabako

The work is motivated by a deep concern for living conditions in the Congo and the city of Kisangani, both today and tomorrow. The resulting projects express vision and show how imagination and desire can find their artistic expression. They are (contemporary) narrations which have a broad influence, beyond the specific context in which they were originally developed, thereby also 'acupuncturing' the rest of the world.

CONCLUSION

This navigation through diverse aspects of the work of Studios Kabako in Kisangani, as well as the review of a former attempt to 'acupuncture' the city of Kumasi, can serve as starting points for discussing the potential of such approaches towards (re)sourcing the African city. In any case, the concept of 'urban acupuncture', understood as the creation of related territorial and programmatic nodes distributed throughout the city, implies the capability of taking dynamic phenomena into account – which is so relevant to capturing the vitality of the African city – and which master planning and (object-) architecture, in the conventional (Western) sense, can hardly accomplish.

"The very act of construction […] implies separation" (Weizman 2008), but pointed interventions of this kind belong to the type of reactive space(s) that demonstrate an alternative to total social, economic, and aesthetic control. Adjusted to the flow of the city, they can field transformative processes and disturbances to a certain extent. Urban space needs to be constantly negotiated and redefined as it is contaminated, hybridized, and transformed in time and space. And "if we recognise our universal need, we will conclude that space is a universal language, a language that everyone can read, can understand, can speak" (Cuyvers 2006).

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