

KOPANO INTERNATIONAL DANCE & PERFORMATIVE ARTS FESTIVAL

KONTORNU 2026 — Think Tank Report

Aesthetics of the Future, Body & Community

May 12, 2026 — Palácio da Cultura Ildo Lobo, Praia, Cabo Verde

Facilitated by Amina Bawa

This discussion was part of the Kontornu — International Gathering of Dance Festival Programmers & Curators, held within the framework of the Kopano International Dance & Performative Arts Festival in Cape Verde. It was originally planned as one of three simultaneous thematic tables on May 11, 2026, at Restaurante Batuku in Cidade Velha, following the methodology “3 Tables · 3 Spaces · 3 Times.”

Due to logistical constraints, this table could not take place on the planned day. On May 12, the group gathered organically at Palácio da Cultura Ildo Lobo in Praia, driven by a collective recognition that the theme was too important and too generative to leave unaddressed. This spontaneous decision reflected the spirit of the entire gathering: a genuine commitment to peer exchange and the collaborative construction of knowledge.

The discussion unfolded informally but with depth, organized around three sub-themes as subdivisions of the overarching theme.

Theme: Aesthetics of the Future, Body & Community

Overarching Question: *What bodies, languages, and narratives do we want to see shaping the future of the performing arts?*

Sub-themes explored: Body & Narratives · Technology & Live Arts · Tradition & Reinvention

Body & Narratives

Key Question: *What bodies are still invisible in our dramaturgies? How can we move beyond “representation” toward real agency for marginalized identities?*

Ideas & responses

- The fragility of bodies was foregrounded — including elderly people, wheelchair users, and people with disabilities — as a concern both for who appears on stage and for the physical conditions of performance spaces and cities. Inaccessible venues exclude before the curtain even rises.
- The presence of people outside the arts world in the audience was seen as essential: when different bodies appear on stage, different audiences follow. The composition of an audience is a direct reflection of the casting and programming decisions made by curators.
- Non-professional dancers were discussed as a rich and underrepresented presence in contemporary performance. Their inclusion raises urgent questions about training: academic curricula often lack preparation for working with diverse bodies, and teachers are frequently expected to improvise solutions without adequate institutional support.
- The concept of “diversity” was interrogated critically. Who holds the power to “include”? The question “Who are you to include?” was posed as a provocation against tokenistic gestures that reproduce hierarchies rather than dismantle them.
- Consistency was emphasized as fundamental: inclusion cannot be a one-off act or a response to external pressure. Bringing different people on stage must be a sustained, intentional, and structurally embedded practice.

Technology & Live Arts

Key Question: *Is AI a tool for human expansion or a new form of archive that freezes the past? Where does the “live” essence reside in an algorithmic era?*

Ideas & responses

- A shared uncertainty opened the conversation: “We still don’t know how to use AI.” Dance and performance are fields that communicate through sensation, affect, and embodied knowledge: things AI cannot yet replicate or adequately interpret. The field learns through other forms of sensing.
- The concentration of information in AI systems was identified as a structural risk: when knowledge is filtered through centralized platforms, critical perspectives and minority voices risk being erased or homogenized.
- There is still a widespread and largely uncritical tendency to believe AI “tells the truth.” Participants cautioned strongly against this, particularly in curatorial or artistic decision-making contexts.
- AI was seen as potentially useful for artists in practical tasks such as research, administration, and documentation, but deep concern was raised about giving technology greater narrative weight in a performance than the performers themselves.
- A key distinction was drawn between the “technology of the body”, the human, somatic, kinetic intelligence inherent to dance and external digital or mechanical technology. Participants affirmed that embodied knowledge must remain central and irreducible.
- The question of whether working formats designed for human collaboration can simply be transposed to AI was raised and met with skepticism. New frameworks are needed rather than mere adaptation of existing ones.
- Technology was also discussed as a powerful tool for accessibility: when thoughtfully applied, it can enable people with disabilities to experience and participate in live performances in ways that were previously impossible, opening the performing arts to a wider and more diverse public.
- The concept of ancestral technology was raised as a reminder that technology is not only digital or contemporary. Traditional knowledge systems, oral transmission, ritual, and embodied practices are also forms of technology, developed over generations to carry culture, meaning, and community.
- Technology as a means of reaching further was affirmed: digital tools and platforms can bring the performing arts to places and communities that have historically been excluded from access, extending the reach of artists and festivals beyond established cultural circuits.

Tradition & Reinvention

Key Question: *How do we honor community archives and traditions without falling into folklorization? How can we “hack” the archive to create new futures?*

Ideas & responses

- Participants spoke of the need to shift perspective, to look at traditions and archives without applying hierarchies of value, particularly those inherited from Eurocentric frameworks. The goal is not to abandon history, but to hold it without letting it become a cage.

- The Sankofa symbol was invoked: the Ghanaian bird that looks backward while moving forward. Looking to the past is not nostalgia, it is a necessary act of orientation toward the future.
- The body as an archive emerged as one of the most resonant ideas of the session: each performer carries within their body the accumulated histories, gestures, and knowledge of their lineage. Being fully on stage, as oneself, with one's heritage, is itself an act of archival transmission and a political statement.
- The diversity of bodies in performance was understood in a long historical sense: before Eurocentric categories solidified, there were already multiple ways of inhabiting and displaying the body. Revisiting these opens generative possibilities for the future.
- Each artist works differently with tradition. Curators were cautioned against assuming that artists from similar backgrounds present the same work or carry the same relationship to their heritage. Careful, attentive selection matters.
- Letting go of prejudice was named as a precondition for genuine encounter: recognizing that there are different truths, none inherently superior, is the foundation of real cross-cultural programming.
- Creative freedom and ethical responsibility were held in tension together: artistic reinvention must be grounded in serious and accountable engagement with the materials, communities, and traditions being drawn upon. Some objects, practices, or sacred materials, such as certain masks, carry specific protocols of access and use that must be respected.
- Breaking down walls takes time. Participants acknowledged the long-term, slow nature of decolonial work: it cannot be rushed, and sustained consistency matters far more than symbolic gestures.

Summary

The discussions highlighted a critical need for genuine structural change and decolonization within the performing arts. Participants challenged superficial tokenism, demanding real agency for marginalized identities and a fundamental rethinking of how academic training prepares artists. By viewing the physical form as a living archive of history and ancestral knowledge, guided by the *Sankofa* principle of looking back to move forward, the group emphasized that true representation on stage directly determines who feels welcome in the audience. This requires consistent, slow work to break down barriers and decolonize curatorial practices, balancing creative freedom with ethical responsibility without romanticizing or folklorizing cultural traditions.

At the same time, the intersection of technology and live arts sparked a debate on preserving embodied knowledge. While participants warned against the risks of AI centralizing information and erasing minority voices, emphasizing that algorithms cannot replicate human somatic intelligence, they also acknowledged technology's positive potential. When used responsibly, it serves as a vital tool to enhance accessibility for people with disabilities, bring arts to isolated communities, and support practical work, all while keeping the deeply rooted "technology of the body" at the very center of artistic expression.