

# Excuse Me I am Expanding

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## Appendix D

*Butoh - Context and Positionality*

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## Ankoku Butō – The Dance of Utter Darkness

The first Butoh performance is generally acknowledged to be *Kinjiki* (Forbidden Colours), performed by Tatsumi Hijikata and Yoshito Ohno in Tokyo in 1959 at the sixth annual presentation of the All Japan Arts Dance Festival (Baird, 2012, pp. 15-17). Based on a novel by Yukio Mishima, the dance's theme of homosexuality and the apparent sacrifice of a chicken ensured a scandalised response. Butoh developed thereafter in relative isolation from other Japanese dance scenes, though it was informed by intensive cross-fertilisations with avant-garde movements in literature, visual arts, and theatre (Baird and Candelario, 2019, pp. 1-3). The other major figure in Butoh's creation, Yoshito's father Kazuo Ohno, saw his most celebrated period of activity arrive in old age – dancing until his death at one hundred and three (an indication of the form's departure from norms of flexibility and youth in dance). These dancers' embrace of mortality and the process nature of existence hints at the ecological, and choreographical explorations of sickness and disability promoted a stark revision of aesthetic values around beauty and athleticism.

Butoh was influenced at the outset by the meeting of Japanese dance culture with European literature and art including surrealism and the work of Jean Genet, Antonin Artaud, Hans Bellmer, and Francis Bacon. German Expressionist dance as epitomised by Mary Wigman and Harold Kreuzberg also left its mark, and recent scholarship explores the influence of black cultural expressions through Hijikata's exposure to the work of Katherine Dunham (Arimitsu, 2019, pp. 37-51). Any picture of it as a purely indigenous Japanese form is thus complicated.

This new dance form was created during a time of countercultural artistic experimentation within Japan and contemporaneous with the work of innovating theatre and performance makers such as Shūji Teryama and Jūro Kara (Viala and Masson-Sékiné, 1988, pp. 11-14). The darkness in *dance of darkness* persistently escapes definition but is generally regarded as indicating the unconscious, the taboo, death, and a search for what Hijikata called the body 'that has not been robbed' by social conditioning and strictures (Fraleigh, 2010, p. 4).

Such explanations must be treated with care due to the danger of mistranslation; for example, the term 'unconscious' is generally read through the lens of Western psychology and thus

indicates a model of self that does not necessarily pertain in Japanese culture. Moreover, despite Hijikata's many writings and those of Japanese scholars and critics, the conceptual basis of Butoh is mainly imparted to dancers through oral instructions (which can vary widely and sometimes contradict each other). My presentation here is an amalgamation of the perspectives I was offered by the most senior of my teachers: Yoshito Ohno, Yukio Waguri, Moe Yamamoto, Kayo Mikami, Seisaku, and Mitsuyo Uesugi.

I have settled on translating Butoh's darkness as the unknown and sometimes the repressed within the depths of the bodymind and the world which is accessible through dance. This definition is capacious enough to accept most of the perspectives I have encountered. The words *beyond* and *invisible* can also be appended since visitation from ancestors, spirits, and mythological beings also features – entities not only unknown but impossible in strict materialist ontologies. Such phenomena exceed the habitual ego-cut and at the moment of encounter they are surprising, seeming to arrive from outside the self or from hidden depths within it. They are always engaged through the body, though encounters may be triggered and nurtured by words, images, music, or environment.

Analogy might here be drawn to the Western notion of a muse (Baldick, 2015), where in Butoh the effort is to access a panoply of muses residing in the bodymind and wider environment. This puts the ego (the demarcated *me*) in a humbled stance of witnessing and surrendering to a profusion of transformations, marking Butoh out from the bulk of Western dance forms both traditional and modern in being redolent of shamanism or possession. In the context of the malleable selfhoods I have been researching however, we might ask who is being possessed by whom. When the habitual ego is placed under suspicion as being contingent and misleading regarding ecological truth, and the dancer presumed capable of emptying themselves whilst still existing as a bodymind, possession as a concept loses coherence. Accessing the inheritance of the oceans in one's body, for example, is materially accurate and not a possession so much as a remembering of, or making contact with, a larger self.

In this project I have overtly re-purposed Butoh methods, extracting elements which lend themselves to ecological realisation in a manner that some purist Butoh artists might regard as objectionable. Ecological crisis was not on the minds of Hijikata or Ohno, and the driver of their rebellion of the body inhered more in the Japanese cultural moment in which they found themselves: a post-Atomic, modernising cultural ferment infused with sometimes oppressive

Japanese traditions and American cultural imperialism. My feeling as a student has been that the self-opening Butoh offers is not restricted to a concept as coherent or utilitarian as ecological selfhood, pointing rather towards a hazy apprehension that we and the world are simply stranger and vaster than we have been allowing. Ecological selfhood can be seen in this light as a sub-set of the larger landscape of Butoh.

Butoh has earned its place as a key development in twentieth century dance and is fast becoming historical in this sense, but this project seeks to clarify aspects of its method which are vital to specific contemporary concerns and valuable in personal navigation of the Anthropocene. Where some dancers, scholars, and institutions such as the Hijikata Tatsumi Archive at Keio University are laudably engaged in accurately preserving Hijikata's original lineage (without such efforts I would not have the knowledge base that I do), my contribution focusses on what Butoh can do now, with specific reference to neoliberal selfhood and ecological crisis. I am confident in my extractions – the method I have drawn out is present in variously explicit or latent forms in Hijikata and Ohno's original dance, and I have discussed it in depth with scholars from the Hijikata Archive and several of my teachers whose lineage descends directly from Hijikata and Ohno.

I am a non-Japanese member of the contemporary globalised Butoh community following its gradual evolution since *Kinjiki*, initially through the successive phases of Hijikata's work and latterly through its dissemination and embellishment by several generations of Butoh dancers. Whilst faithful to my years of training, I have given myself permission (and was given permission by my teachers) to extrapolate and innovate upon it, incorporating my own aesthetic sensibilities and lifelong artistic processes – I did not begin dancing until I was twenty-eight, and my dance practice overlays my pre-existing writing and musical creativity. Butoh has long since migrated beyond Japan, and debates continue about what might be gained or lost in this transplanting. My own fears of cultural appropriation as an Irish-Scottish artist have been allayed via in depth conversation with teachers including co-founder Yoshito Ohno, as well as Hijikata Tatsumi Archive director Takashi Morishita. My confidence is also bolstered by the intensity of my commitment to the form over the last fifteen years.

My experience of the Butoh world is that it is indeed vulnerable to dilettantism and fetishistic appropriation due to its existence outwith formal schools of validation. But this non-institutional dissemination is also a strength in preserving its autonomous and rebellious stance

– provided that practitioners commit to honest and rigorous training, and do not seek to dance *Japanesely* if they are not. The issue of appropriation in Butoh is ensnared by its debt to non-Japanese cultures and to the back-and-forth influences which saw preceding European artists enchanted by Japonisme in the nineteenth century (Fraleigh, 2010, p. 17). It is difficult to say with confidence how much of Butoh is intrinsically Japanese, and more difficult still to establish if any of it may be performed only by the Japanese (a proposition I have heard, but only rarely, from a few Japanese artists). In my view, and that of teachers I have consulted such as Yoshito, the cross-pollination involved in globalising Butoh is enriching if handled sensitively.

Hijikata's writing style is regarded as wilfully obscure even for Japanese people, cleaving to surrealism and illogicality as well as a byzantine self-mythologisation. My understanding of his method and perspective is a synthesis of these writings with the oral histories received from my teachers, video and photographic documentation of classic Butoh performances, and my first-hand experiences of putting his provocations and choreographies to work in my own body. It is therefore difficult to offer clear or systematic evidence for Butoh's workings through quotations alone, but certain passages from Hijikata, such as the following, speak directly to animistic leanings:

The stimulus to forget the fact of being a human elicits the condition of feeling affection for things below humanity. The possession of non-human power and subhuman power reaches the caustic emotion, which enucleates the psychology of inanimate objects.

(Centonze, 2018, p. 16)

I am unsure if 'below humanity' is an accurate translation from the Japanese, but my training has never involved any sense of humans as superior to other forms of being. The point is rather the collapse of subject-object duality afforded by the proposition that inanimate objects have a psychology which we can discover, relate to, and become through embodied-imagination.

A concern with access to other modes of being is emphasised in *The Body as a Vessel*, my teacher Kayo Mikami's exposition of Butoh methods from the perspective of a practitioner and student of Hijikata. She quotes him as saying:

My dance is not at all anti classical dance. It is about an expansion of the concept

of a human being... rooted in the discovery of the possibility that the human body may metamorphose into anything from animals and plants, to inanimate objects.

(Mikami, 2016, p. 73)

But despite such investment in connection with nature and the non-human, Butoh does not rely on exposure to wilderness (as might be assumed of an ecological dance form). It has no truck with the human / nature binary in the first place, and as a form suitable to urban living it benefits from accessibility to a wide demographic (it can be engaged with from wherever you find yourself). Though its practice opens onto ever deepening experience with time and patience, there is no barrier to newcomers. Yoshito and his father Kazuo taught into old age and even after fame and acclaim would open all workshops to whoever wished to join. Despite initial appearances – most recognisably this means white-painted, grotesque, shaven-headed beings engaged in non-expository dancing – Butoh is highly accessible, adaptable, and transmissible. It has nurtured my professional practice but also allowed me to communicate something of ecological reality to diverse individuals and groups over the years through my teaching and performances.

The best way to illustrate how Butoh methods work in performance is by example. On my first trip to Japan in 2013 I spent time training with Seisaku, one of Hijikata's disciples in the last phase of his career in the mid-1980s. Before encountering Seisaku's teaching, I watched him dance and was dumbfounded at the transformations he appeared to be undergoing. I saw something no longer human, shifting between blurry ghost forms and buffeted by unseen weather systems, sometimes taking concrete shapes of animals, trees, and demons. He appeared to be introducing a mode of being to the room, manifestly different than the conventional individualist one I was inhabiting as a travelling Westerner, and also different than the other Japanese people present. Rather than being impressed by a technical display, I was struck by Seisaku's having somehow *gone beyond*, reaching the audience simply by inclining his state of being towards us.

This opens onto the question of how experiences had by Butoh dancers are communicated to others, and why artistic performance has been a core activity since the outset. Though Butoh artists often train alone or in private and there is ample validation for the practice to be found simply in the self-transformations experienced by dancers themselves, they are also in the main

drawn to performance for a public. Butoh performances can be like exhibitions in the sense that a being is exhibited for the audience, and this takes precedence over linear narrative or representation – this despite extensive use of supporting theatrical devices such as precise lighting and shadow, costume, and music, whose function is generally to enhance the apprehension of the dancing being and their metamorphoses. In this thesis I have summarised the mode of communication Butoh employs towards audiences as a wordless **resonance** between one bodymind and another.

This way of communicating is learned gradually. In one of our first classes, Seisaku brought bundles of dry leaves into the studio and scattered them on the floor. We were to feel them with our fingers, rub them on our bodies, listen to the sound they made, lie down in them, put them in our mouths. They were an abstracted piece of ‘nature’ introduced into a more sterile studio setting. We began dancing with them and then left them behind, dancing the leaves without their direct presence and internalising their quiddity. Seisaku’s simple statement about the exercise was ‘Now you have these materials in your body’.

I have done similar exercises with countless objects and materials in my training since. In this case, my bodymind was filled with the leaves, prompting my physicality to alter so that a total gestalt arose in my embodied-imagination, inclusive of cognition, emotion, and identity. This is different in kind to the act of writing about leaves, where the mind is sent in search of them, and the body somewhat left behind - most likely sitting and scribbling, or ‘transparent’ (Spatz, 2007, p.4), simply a necessary vessel for the cogitating mind. It is also different from studying leaves, where the subject-object distinction is by definition upheld. Afterwards I came to care about and revere the leaves in question, having *been* them. Through such exercises I can observe how entities such as leaves have never been quite the same for me since – they are less other, indicating a shift in my own selfhood. When Butoh dancers speak of becoming something, or metamorphosing, this is what they mean.

Communicating such metamorphoses in performance is a skill I regard as distinct from the metamorphoses themselves. It involves gradually learning to be less introverted with the bodymind, to metamorphose in an *open* way which lets an audience in but does not manipulate them via artifice or add semiotic representations of the states being experienced. The difference between training for oneself and communicating in performance might be exemplified by the eyes and face. In my workshops I mainly teach the initial skill of learning to transform the

bodymind. Participants frequently do so with eyes closed and an introverted orientation, resulting in deep personal discoveries that seem shielded or hidden from the gaze of others. The second phase (learning to communicate) must involve sharing these same discoveries with open eyes and a fearless face, risking vulnerability before others. If a dancer can do this, they can *radiate* their metamorphosis outwards towards an audience. This took me some time to understand personally, but I believe it is what Seisaku was doing when I saw him perform.

My method of Playing with the Cut is a calculated adaptation of Butoh, not so much in terms of any dance innovation as in the stated goal of the practice. I am emphasising this because I am aware of at least one dancer who is acerbic in their criticism of contemporary artists repurposing Hijikata's form towards anything other than its original intentions (though precisely what these are is open to question due to Hijikata's trickster persona and mystifying pronouncements). I also know from training under several of Hijikata's pupils and other elders of Butoh that they often contradict each other on key points, sometimes privately disdaining each other's approach. My summation is that this is partly due to changes in Hijikata's priorities over the course of his career, with his disciples tending to hold to the conception of Butoh they were taught during the phase of its evolution in which they worked with him. Yoshito, present at the very first Butoh performance, confirmed to me that many of the key tenets later disciples taught me were not present in Hijikata's method in the early phases.

I have noted more anxiety around precise preservation of Hijikata's lineage than that of the Ohnos. This reflects differences between their styles and outlooks (the Ohnos were more improvisational and focussed on a dancer's heartfelt and guileless expressivity, regarding whatever is released from such a process as valid). The preservation of Hijikata's work is a sensitive issue which I experienced first-hand in collaborating with Hijikata Tatsumi Archive for my ecological festival UNFIX in Tokyo. Archive director Takashi Morishita, though he had already approved of my dancing, was initially suspicious and then embracing of my pontifications about Butoh's use in an age of ecological crisis, keen to reassure himself first that I wasn't simply a Westerner exploiting his friend's genius.

My contention is that Butoh can be both a carefully preserved dance innovation that was of its time but can continue to be practised as a tradition, and also a startlingly relevant method for exploration of contemporary concerns if allowed to be articulated as such. Hijikata's creation is rich enough to cater to both concerns, and my offering in this project is no doubt only one of



numerous reframings of Butoh which might be considered. Hijikata himself was constantly evolving the form and gave no indication that he wished it to be preserved in amber after his death. It remains critical, however, to acknowledge both the source of inspiration in Hijikata's work, and the ways in which it is being departed from. I hope I have done so in this project.

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