

Introduction

*The
Difference
the
Other
Makes*

June 17, 1997

This metaphysical diary on *Butoh, Zen, and Japan* is undertaken in the spirit of the difference the other can make. As a student of Zen and Butoh, I have set forth a diary of essays and poetry that explores and savors my changes in apprehension—metaphysical and aesthetic. Inhaling my otherness, I witnessed my own unfolding and transformation in Japan. In setting down my thoughts, I found I had collected experiences, not the objects of art themselves. They marked my path on a larger journey, the dance of which we are all a part. When I left America, I remember a friend saying to me: “Japan will change your life.” She knew I was in for more than theatrical and cultural sightseeing.

The essays in this volume begin a chronology that led me to

this journey. They carry through it and continue with reflections back, reworking and integrating aesthetic points of view and new understandings through ongoing study. My metaphysical journeying in Japan through Zen and Butoh is still unwinding. Meanwhile Butoh has moved from marginal theater to center stage in recent performances at major and regional theaters in Japan and around the world. Artists like Yoko Ashikawa who once performed for Butoh-identified audiences finally achieved wider recognition in Japan and abroad, also performing at the Joyce Theater in New York City. Kazuo Ohno, who turned ninety years old in 1996, is still performing internationally. In America, he performed the entire cycle, *My Mother*, at the Japan Society in New York in February 1996, prancing to an Elvis Presley recording of a Baptist hymn for his encore. Critic Camille Hardy called the encore “an obscene afterthought” to the dance, but she also detailed Ohno’s “unusual physical beauty and visual mysticism, now only fleetingly seen in live performance.”¹

Does all this mean that Butoh has become mainstream? No, I don’t think so. For many, its novel mixtures of aesthetic means will continue to seem “obscene.” Existing in the cultural cracks, Butoh intends to be jarring and (like the sound of one hand clapping) provocative.

If not mainstream, it has become a very large stream indeed, and it has had the powerful aesthetic result of erasing cultural differences between “us” and “them.” While politicians continue to fight for territorial turf internationally, Butoh dancers are bridging cultures. Natsu Nakajima has created works for American,

Canadian, and French dancers. (I describe one of these in “Empty Land.”) Min Tanaka has recently undertaken *The Poe Project*, based on stories by Edgar Allen Poe with a libretto by Susan Sontag. This project will include U.S.-based dancers who will live on Tanaka’s farm in Japan while the dance work is being completed. More intrinsically, Butoh itself crosses cultural boundaries, as we shall take up in various contexts.

Butoh anticipates a growing global amalgamation of previous distinctions: racial, cultural, and aesthetic.² It shows Japan’s historical/spiritual ties with other Asian countries in its contemplative movement modes. Butoh also unsettles traditional gender distinctions and East/West differences in its eclectic use of music and costumes. As the twenty-first century dawns, it is becoming more difficult to trace pure identities, and Butoh celebrates this fact even as it asserts a Japanese essence. Its beauty stems from its search for corporeal universals amid folk roots.

Dancing into darkness: the stories, essays, and poetry of this text also cross boundaries, but they all derive either directly or implicitly from the mythical feminine (*yin*), the dark earth principle at work in the Butoh aesthetic. My explorations of Butoh, also called “the dance of darkness,” have led me to a deeper appreciation of Zen and Japan, which I have woven into these essays. The aesthetics of Butoh reflect the older values of pre-modern Japan. They evoke the original face of Japan beneath the fast-paced surface, and the timeless austerity of Zen, awash with mystical emptiness and nature’s evanescence.

If Butoh contains a Zenlike spirit, it is also unmistakably post-



Tatsumi Hijikata, carrying a baby through a field. From Eikoh Hosoe's photography book on Hijikata and his performance of *Kamaitachi* (1969).
Photo © Eikoh Hosoe.

modern, an arresting aesthetic jumble of historical periods and cross-cultural bodies. But Butoh is more than collage. Its collisions explore a Japanese identity in folk and spiritual traditions (Shinto and Zen) and subvert the West's commercial influence.

Butoh has been growing and diversifying in styles since its inception in 1959 with Tatsumi Hijikata's homoerotic performance of *Kinjiki* (*Forbidden Colors*). Without music or conventional dance movement, he danced this on a darkened stage as a duet with Yoshito Ohno, Kazuo Ohno's son. Hijikata's deviation from



Butoh founder Kazuo Ohno and his son Yoshito improvise for a photograph by Kevin Bubriski. Ohno's upward gaze focuses our attention on his eyes while Yoshito's eyes are hidden. Ohno's fingers articulate an intimate inner space while Yoshito's fingers tense into claws.

established aesthetics shocked a Japanese dance community that had been for many years cultivating Western modern dance forms. Butoh, through Hijikata (1928–1986) and its other founder, Kazuo Ohno (b. 1906), developed a primal form of dance theater that continues to evolve. It has also inspired corporeal environmental art through performers like Min Tanaka, whose clothed and nude body has been photographed extensively as he moves trancelike in juxtaposition with a wide variety of natural and man-made environments, including the extremes of Iceland, where he painted his body black, and construction sites with steel girders as background for dramatic costumes. Butoh takes a distinctly different turn from the matter-of-fact minimalism and mundane playfulness of American postmodern dance that also began in the 1960s. Butoh taps the subconscious body by stripping the social body, and its aesthetic dramatizes the beauty of emergent form through natural processes of birth and decay.

Butoh is at once natural and theatrical. It is now more an aesthetic movement than a specific dance or theater form, also inspiring a great deal of photography and visual art. Pittsburgh artist Robert La Bobgah has designed a large *Hijikata Triptych* with shadowy painting and poetry that captures Butoh's concern with death and the void. Recent choreography influenced by Butoh such as that of Setsuko Yamada downscales the shock of the original Butoh daring. In her contemporary work and others, there is a post-Butoh break with Butoh origins that nevertheless builds upon its movement techniques and descendant values of darkness. There are also artists who continue to expand upon Hijikata's original



Butoh founder Tatsumi Hijikata on the right panel of the *Hijikata Triptych* by Pittsburgh artist Robert La Bobgah, also photographed by La Bobgah. He states his interest in “the darkness that our modern eye has lost, where the gap between words and things disappear.” “I shake hands with the dead,” is how Hijikata expresses his central thematic.

style—such as American Joan Laage and Japanese Kayo Mikami. Butoh has branched out from its beginnings to become international in its productions and its appeal as well as its choreographers and dancers. In producing a novel fusion of worldcut fragments, Butoh may be the most intercultural postmodern art we have (if the labels *postmodern* and *Butoh* have not become too limiting).

Butoh might also be viewed as part of the restoration of the expressionist origins of modern dance in the postmodern period, paralleling but diverging significantly from the developments of contemporary Tanztheater in Germany arising through Pina Bausch, Susanne Linke, and others. Butoh and Tanztheater both have sources in the original expressionist movement in Germany, as we shall take up. In any case, it is not possible to entirely separate Butoh from any of these movements. It represents an important development in the growth of modern/postmodern dance (even if it rejects extant styles), just as “modern” and “postmodern” are also inextricably linked, yet distinct. Butoh is not an aesthetic movement grafted onto Western dance, and Western dance may be more Eastern than we have been able to see. Butoh helps us to understand the global development and borrowings of modern/postmodern dance.

We should especially note that the original modern dance through Ruth St. Denis, Mary Wigman, and Martha Graham often turned to Eastern cultures for its inspiration and stylizations, and the passionately lean Ukiyo-e Japanese prints were much admired by the expressionists. If Butoh took part of its impetus from the experimental nature of modern dance, modern dance in-

cluding its early expressionist school borrowed liberally from the aesthetic styles of the East. Which came first, East or West? Even the terms are too general for an adequate answer. Japan, China, France, Nigeria, Korea, Canada, the United States, Brazil, and more all have distinct (if sometimes overlapping) histories and cultures. At the same time, all are part of one modern cultural and intellectual world.

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Zen and Japan are folded into my major subject of Butoh—"the dance of utter darkness." As I write, it is now 1996, eleven years since I first saw this unique and astounding dance expression that emerged from postwar Japan. Butoh has now become post-Butoh and beyond, but it has retained an essential expressionist thread akin to the unparalleled Ukiyo-e woodcut color prints, originating in the second half of seventeenth-century Japan. This art, also called "Pictures of the Floating World School," died out with the influence of the West when Japan opened its doors to foreigners in 1868.

Curiously enough the postmodern/neo-expressionist Butoh moved back in time to recover Japan's folk identity in the midst of its rapid westernization after World War II. The master stylists of Butoh have much in common with Ukiyo-e's abstract stylizations of the human figure in motion that are still vital today. Woodcuts illustrated popular life and the original Kabuki theater—its ac-

tors and patrons, passions and intrigues. The print colors, now dimmed through age, were once very bright. This art captured the life in Edo (the original name for Tokyo) after the Tokugawa shogunate brought stability and prosperity to a troubled country in the seventeenth century.

Ukiyo-e documents common life as well as the sophistications and vices of the times. Many prints concern the world-within-a-world of the queenly courtesans of the Green Houses. Heroic legends and historical romances dealing with the civil wars of the middle ages abound. Depictions often employ a traditional Japanese feminine grace. Suzuki Harunobu, who died in 1770, painted “Eight Parlour Scenes” (1766) and “Girl Performing the ‘Lion Dance’” (1769–70). His pupil Harushige painted “Courtesan Leading a Youth to her Bed with a Lighted Taper whilst her Young Attendant Sleeps” (1772). Torii Kiyomine (1787–1869), a master of the Torii school, was one of the last of this great line of Japanese artists. His subject, “Geisha Restranging her Samisen” (1807), would be typical. There are also rural scenes of travelers on the road, families and lovers, and daily activities like washing clothes. Its subjects are wide-ranging, but play, sex, and theater—not work—are the serious occupations of Ukiyo-e.

Katsukawa Shunko was one of the earliest Ukiyo-e artists to design *O-kub-e*, or large heads, as in his “Head of an *Onnagata*” (1787). An *onnagata* is a male actor taking female parts in the Kabuki. Butoh scholar Susan Blakeley Klein notes that in its beginnings, Butoh sought to bring its expression within the original popular mass appeal of Kabuki before it became refined for

Western taste. Butoh also appropriated early Kabuki exploration of the dark and repressed sides of social life and its ability to turn this into an aesthetic positive.³

Nature was another thematic in the development of woodblock color prints, as it later would be in Butoh. In Ukiyo-e as in Butoh, worldliness and high theatricality exist alongside nature and the bucolic. Costumes are a preoccupation in both arts. The body is elaborately adorned in both Ukiyo-e and Butoh, or exposed and boldly colored with paint and white powder. Ukiyo-e, like Butoh, is not remote from Western sensibilities. The aesthetic climate of the expressive Ukiyo-e style is more accessible to us than earlier, more formal and distanced Japanese art.⁴ Ukiyo-e's stylized emotions can be recognized in consummate Butoh faces, in love, hopelessness, terror, even ferocity—then in stillness—so beautiful that one holds one's breath.

Affectivity in Butoh (as in Ukiyo-e) is concentrated and exaggerated, an important element of its communicative power. Indeed, the emotional intensity of Butoh proves an example of aesthetic and social rebellion, drawing up a dualistic Japanese history, anything but puritanical, of behavioral tolerances and violations juxtaposed with a gentle fastidiousness and quiet grace. There is great ambiguity in both Ukiyo-e and Butoh. Significantly, Butoh holds parody, travesty, cross-dressing, and burlesque in common with Ukiyo-e.⁵ These can be seen in Hijikata's outrageous dance, *Revolt of the Flesh* (1968).

A more recent inspiration for Japan's avant garde theater, whose first major figure was Hijikata, comes from the late Meiji, Taisho,

and early Showa period popular art, the mass art of roughly 1910–1930. Japanese film critic Donald Richie describes this movement as developing a novel vocabulary that pictured better “or at least more innocent” days through bright colors, cartoon hard-edge drawings, menus, newspapers, old photographs, and abundant depictions of extreme emotions that turned on a purposeful naivete.⁶ This time period corresponds with the root development of expressionist modern art (and dance) in Europe and America, but was more a pop-art movement in Japan.

During the fifties and into the sixties, Hijikata presented theatrical performances unlike any seen in postwar Japan or anywhere else. In startling bad taste, he brandished an oversized strapped-on penis, then danced in a pink dress with knee socks—his wild lion hair, beard, and mustache adding an absurdly dadaist touch or *Taisho-look*. I saw this dance on film at the Museum of Modern Art in San Francisco at an installation on Hijikata’s work in the summer of 1996. There were no chairs, so I assumed a typical Asian sitting posture on the floor, and my husband Warren leaned against the wall. (Like many American men, his legs won’t fold into the sitting posture.) I watched people come and go throughout, staying for no more than minutes at a time, then leaving in embarrassed silence. Many covered their mouths or eyes, or looked at the floor. Warren and I were the only ones to see the whole performance. Hijikata, part shaman, part deconstructor, groped toward a new dance form that would bridge popular and esoteric art worlds as he lamented the death of Japan.

Hijikata's clashing *Taisho*-look seen in early Butoh experiments is now transforming or disappearing, having served as a shock awakening, but the love of design and distillation of emotion demonstrated in Ukiyo-e continues to pour through the opening that the original Butoh created. In Butoh and Ukiyo-e, emotion is unforgettably etched in face and figure. We can also find convincing etching (or stylization) of emotion in German expressionism (Mary Wigman, Kurt Jooss, and Harald Kreutzberg) and early modern dance in America (especially Martha Graham). The Butoh face, however, is magnified; it dances in minute detail as in Ukiyo-e. In Ukiyo-e's stylizations, everything dances, even the kimonos and butterflies dance, and moths have been etched in flight. Neither Ukiyo-e nor Butoh is limited in aesthetic range or detail. Kobu Shunman, 1757–1820, uses silvery grays and light touches of soft colors to paint miniature creatures and state their significance in *Hawk-Moth and Butterflies*, just as founding Butoh artist and teacher Kazuo Ohno considers the universe in moth wings and explores embryonic dance, *A Dream of the Fetus*, in a softly detailed and inner-directed style that is the reverse side of Hijikata's wildness.

Ohno traces his relationship with his feminine side in *My Mother*. Remembering the womb, he explores control, desire, and exertion in a section called "The Will." He feels his mother's presence with him after death in "I Shall Not Correct It." I was lucky to see Ohno's impromptu performance of this dance in his studio, and to experience the movement he inspires in students from this source, as I describe in the chapter, "My Mother." Ohno

was to provide Hijikata's raw confrontational style a gentle complement. Even so, Ohno teaches that to know the universe, we cannot turn away from ugliness and the messy refuse of life.

Ohno and Hijikata both grew up poor, as the conscience and dark poesis of their dancing reflects. They say they dance with death and the ancestors invoking the spirits of their mothers and sisters, or as Hijikata states it: "When I am immersed in creating a dance my sister scratches away the darkness inside me / finally devouring it all." Hijikata died at midlife, while Ohno, in his nineties, is the oldest living Butoh soloist and still performs his poetic choreography internationally.

Butoh has sought (and is still unraveling) what is most essentially Japanese. I hope to show, however, that the deeper search of Butoh is for what it means to be human. As I documented my experiences in Butoh workshops and performances, my appreciation of Zen meditation and Butoh aesthetics grew. I began to see a Zen emptiness and cathartic aesthetic at work in the development of Butoh, one not culturally or historically circumscribed. Through the 1980s and nineties, I began to notice that Butoh was also becoming an international movement, that it held a universal touchstone for many. Now, wherever I go, I am learning about Butoh-influenced dance and theater; in Canada, the United States, Britain, France, Germany, Brazil, and most recently in Norway with the Butohbasert group of Monica Emilie Herstad. Susannah Akerlund carries on the tradition of Yoko Ashikawa in Sweden, and San Francisco hosts an annual international Butoh festival through d-net (dance-network) and Dancers' Group. When we in

the Congress on Research in Dance overlapped our 1993 conference with the Association of American Theater in Higher Education in Atlanta, they had more sessions on Butoh than we did.

As I traveled the Japanese character through Butoh in Japan, I realized that some of the postmodern dance that had caught my attention earlier in America in the 1970s had a Butoh basis unknown to me at the time. These flashed back in sudden recognition: Kei Takei with her explorations of a collective unconscious (why did she tap and slam rocks together, and pile them in circles?), and the hypnotic Eiko and Koma (why did their slow and minimal erotic duets feature potatoes?). In Japan, where Butoh has had a most difficult struggle for acceptance, this year saw an unprecedented collaboration between Butoh and Kabuki artists produced by Japan's top Kabuki historian, Masakatsu Gunji: *Kabuki Butoh "Jesus Christ in Aomori."* This work was danced by the famous Kabuki actor/dancer, Kyozo Nakamura, and Butoh performer Yukio Waguri, one of the most technically versatile dancers in Butoh. (Waguri's performance with Natsu Nakajima is detailed in the chapter "Empty Land.") In Gunji's production, Butoh, a radical art in a traditionally conservative country, melded with recent Kabuki, the form it had once rejected (or preserved and transformed in drawing upon its bawdy folk origins). This performance kept alive the spiritual, international, and syncretic flavor of Butoh, taking the crucified Christ as a central figure. If this seems like too much to balance in one theater work, suffice it to say that balance has not been the mainstay of Butoh's multicultural expressionism.



Playbill advertisement for Kabuki Butoh “Jesus Christ in Aomori,” produced by Masakatsu Gunji, one of Japan’s most respected critics, and a scholar of both Kabuki and Butoh. Traditional Kabuki actor/dancer Kyozo Nakamura and Butoh dancer Yukio Waguri performed. *Photograph by Masakatsu Gunji, used with permission of Theater X.*

I have not labored to connect these essays, but like a post-modern choreographer or a deconstructive architect, I leave these pathways to the reader's discovery. The essays are based on the experiences of an American in a culture not her own, who has made aesthetic and spiritual ties. When we experience ourselves through another cultural lens, we are enriched. When we interpret another culture through our own lens, we bring the difference the other can bring—sometimes the same things that insiders see, but more often aspects that bridge the known with the strange. And it is the strangeness of the unknown (how it can rearrange our perceptual field) that calls us to travel across the bridge of difference, after all. Then, when familiar territory is given up, the traveler can stand in a new familiar, in the place where worlds (and they are whole worlds) meet.

Late November 1994

My interests often elicit good-natured comments from the Japanese on how it takes a foreigner (who comes to Japan) to “teach the Japanese” about Zen and Butoh. When outsiders take an interest in another culture, especially if they adopt aspects that ring (in some way) true to their own character, natives may see themselves in a new light. Strangeness, the difference the other makes, sharpens the familiar.

I know this happens to me on home ground. When Japanese-born Hidenori Tomozoe, a judo expert, saw an Elizabeth Streb