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Butoh, bodies, and being*

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This essay argues for a fluid view of the Japanese avant-garde dance form. Just as butoh resists fixity, this essay is a pastiche of perspectives constituting multiple interpretations of butoh rather than a singular explanation. Through a consideration of Judith Hamera's 1990 essay "Butoh, Ma, and a Crosscultural Gaze," coupled with recent popular attention to the form, historical narratives of the Japanese avant-garde and butoh, personal narrative, and reflections provided by butoh performers, this essay opens up alternative ways for thinking about dance practices, and butoh specifically, in performance studies.

I was first exposed to performing butoh during the fall semester of my second year in graduate school, though I was not a stranger to the form as I had seen video and still images of performances. I had a long history with dance and performance at that point in my career: I had spent my youth studying ballet, dancing with the Joffrey Ballet's Children's Ballet Corps at age eleven; started dancing in musicals at age fourteen; decided I like theatre better than dance at age sixteen; studied acting in a liberal arts theatre department during my undergraduate education; after spending a summer studying with Anne Bogart and the SITI company, decided I wanted to return to the physically focused art of my youth in a new way; and midway through my degree I decided that performance art was more my speed. After graduation, I moved to New York following the aspiring-young-artist dream, and worked with the International WOW Company, devising physical theatre in response to social phenomena.

It was now late 2001.

It was 9/11.

We were not doing butoh; we were performing realistic, albeit experimental, theatre. But looking back on it, the images we were creating and the scenes we devised were very much in a butoh spirit, if not in a butoh "style." I was introduced to butoh by performing butoh and my understanding

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of it is firmly based in its practice. Rather than knowing it through the role of the critic which can make butoh a thing, a style, a form, or a genre, my experience of butoh has made it a philosophy, an approach, a way of being. I argue that attempting to understand butoh from the side of practice as an addition to scholarship allows for an embracing of the complexity of butoh, which may avoid destroying its spirit.

This essay moves through the contradictions, influences, and blendings of butoh—as a practice in my life and as a subject of critical inquiry by scholars of dance, the Japanese avant-garde, and postmodernism. Butoh’s spirit defies techniques, histories, and mummification typical of Western dance forms, and this essay will follow suit defying and deferring a definition of the performance practice. Just as butoh resists fixity, this essay is a pastiche of perspectives constituting multiple interpretations of butoh rather than a singular explanation. It travels through the storying of butoh in performance studies; description of its antecedents; a painting of what butoh looks like; placement of butoh in the Japanese avant-garde tradition; and alternative ways of thinking about butoh.

* * *

Dance and Performance Studies

The form shocked American viewers during its New York debut in 1984. “Yet,” *New York Times* dance critic Jack Anderson notes, “Butoh intends to do more than shock, for the choreographers associated with it seek to show the complexities of human emotions, the turbulence of existence and the awesomeness of the universe” (17). An ambitious project, that would be no small feat to accomplish. In a 1990 review of the Paris-based butoh company Sankai Juku, Anderson notes, “the dancers, instead of seeming to be responding to the mystery of life, . . . do little more than show off their muscular control” (17). Recent articles in the *New York Times* have brought butoh back into focus as a performance form that is not without troubles. Performance reviews of Sankai Juku’s October 2006 performances in New York City questioned its authenticity. Of the performances, Gia Kourlas writes, “The name of the game is East meets West, and the result is a soulless fusion. . . . Unfortunately there are many . . . moments in which it appears that they are Butoh dancers practicing voguing moves” (10). These reviews give rise to the project of Claudia La Rocco’s 2006 articles “Is Butoh’s Big Season Good for Butoh” and “The Twain Do Meet in a Busy Imagination,” which extend these ideas, questioning butoh and butoh-influenced artists about what today’s butoh is now that it has been widely embraced throughout the world and modified, resisting a codified language, technique, or definition.

Performance studies frequently addresses dance as a metaphor rather than an object or method of focus, and the literature on dance in communication studies is told largely through a cultural lens. Many scholars look at how

dance influences culture and how culture is recorded and maintained through dance (Hamera, Shue, and Beck) and through a specific focus on dance, while others view dance as part of a larger cultural and artistic phenomenon (Lengel, Holton, Mackinlay). Other performance studies scholars have found their entrée into the dance world through projects involving individual dancers (see Corey, Daly, Funkenstein) or dance companies (see Bordwell). In these studies they are searching for ways to write about dance and the ineffable, or critiquing the ways this has been done in the past (see Bordwell, Foster). In most cases they use critical theory and philosophy, applying it to specific cases, and opening areas for the understanding of dance as communication on a larger epistemic stage.

Judith Hamera's contributions to performance studies scholarship on dance have influenced the way we view dance as more than an aesthetic representation and as a way of culture building and community organizing. Over the past twenty years she has written numerous essays concerning dance, addressing butoh in several of her articles and reviews. Her 1990 essay, "Silence That Reflects: Butoh, *Ma*, and a Crosscultural Gaze," is a focused study of butoh. The article begins with the assertion that contemporary performance and dance in America has taken a turn toward the multicultural, the largest and heaviest impact on this trend being the influx of Pacific Rim performance forms, specifically butoh.

Hamera cites butoh's emergence in the same year as Allan Kaprow's "18 Happenings in 6 Parts." She argues that while Kaprow and other American artists were working "to extend the boundaries of their individual media," Japanese butoh work was "a more complete rejection of, not only the aesthetics of the time, but the entire socio-cultural climate of then-contemporary Japan and its past" (Hamera 55). Describing American butoh as lyrical with small movements, she wonders at this "look" of butoh which seems contrary to the "violent, spasmodic antecedents" of the atomic bomb (55).

Hamera views the flowing movement style of butoh as different from most Western performance and locates this difference in the relationship of action and meaning: "In general, in Western movement-based performance, action/movement and meaning coincide; such a performance 'means' through what it does. Movement is read as a text to generate meaning" (57). She contrasts this with butoh, whose text and meaning exist both in the actions and in the spaces between actions, using the concept of *ma*. *Ma* is a term that "describes a meaning-full interval in space, time, or space-time, an interval with both objective and subjective aspects, inherently relational, most easily apprehended in a religio-aesthetic context" (57). However, the use of *ma* as a lens for reading butoh is problematic for Hamera because of its religio-aesthetic roots which she sees butoh deconstructing.

Noting Edward Said's argument that "orientalism exists as a mist before the eyes of anyone attempting to study 'the' Orient" (Hamera 59), she also calls attention to the status of butoh until the late 1980s as an export art.

This leads her to suspect the audience would have read *butoh*, not in its revolutionary impact on its own culture, but through their own cultural lens as aesthetically different from Western performance. She argues then there is an internalized Western gaze on the part of Japanese practitioners to explain “the attenuated lyricism of Western *butoh* artists” arguing that “*butoh* artists might appropriate and reappropriate shards of this reading into their performance, consciously or unconsciously” (59). “Even Kazuo Ohno,” she notes, “one of the founders of the form, moves in the gentle prolonged *ma* style that seems the antithesis of the ostensible aim of *butoh*” (59). Concluding her article with the recognition that the codes of language, including dance and performance, are known only through culture, she states her concerns for *butoh* and cross- or multicultural performance in general as “directed toward how such work is viewed” (59). However, it remains unclear if her concern is how such work is viewed by an audience, by the dancers, or both.

I find Hamera’s argument informative to my own understanding of *butoh*. Her call for a richer interpretation of *butoh* as a cross-cultural art developing in diaspora requires reflexive consideration at a level I had not originally entertained when I began practicing *butoh*. While I find her justifications, reasonings and explanations of the Western attempt to understand Eastern aesthetics and philosophies in the viewing of *butoh* helpful and useful, I would like to add to her argument some counterpoints that may expand and complicate this consideration even further. To do this, this essay makes two moves. First, it situates *butoh* in the larger picture of the Japanese avant-garde making sense of the religio-aesthetic aspects of *ma* in relation to *butoh* differently than does Hamera. Secondly, it addresses *butoh* as always already influenced by Western art movements, combining and retooling these strategies with its own Eastern aesthetic prior to exportation. Both moves further destabilize any claim to a “pure” form or a “Western” gaze. Hamera states her “concerns are directed toward how such work is viewed” (59). Instead of interpreting *butoh* from the spectator position, I attempt to focus on how it is performed. Examining how *butoh* is performed through the words and experiences of those who perform it reveal *butoh* as resisting intellectualization; as an art form that has rebuked definition, technique and classification; and as a slippery form that glides out from under us each time a puncture is made. Though performers certainly do a type of theorizing or intellectualizing by talking about and sharing their experiences of *butoh*, this type of theorization lives within *butoh* and is different from scholarly theorizing. Thus, with this lens some of the problems Hamera finds in the way *butoh* is viewed become complications or nuances of the form rather than points that serve to undermine or attenuate it.

* * *

But how can I talk about *butoh* to people who do not perform it? How can I connect it with their lives and make momentary sense of it? This same

professor who introduced me to butoh, and later directed my thesis, is also a professional performance artist. When I moved to Chicago in 2004, he was performing in a butoh showcase at Links Hall, a space for independent dance and performance, a space I would come to consider a second home. I, of course, went to watch him perform. I was not impressed by much of what I saw that evening, but his performance stood out. The images he created were striking, and the feeling of the piece was poignant. I couldn't take my eyes off him or disengage.

This was my introduction to the independent performance scene in the city, and from that point on I could not extricate myself from it. I soon found myself working with the people performing that evening and forging close connections. This sort of spark, spiraling out, and community formation is typical of butoh, as with many kinds of dance. In butoh personal bodily memories break through the surface and the dancer moves in the liminal space between the past and the present, the self and the community. You meet other artists, experience *communitas*, and are forever linked whether your version of butoh aligns with theirs or you find one another's work invigorating, and/or whether there is competition (which there most certainly is in all art scenes), there is a support and mutual respect that is the undercurrent. Butoh is a feeling that is not fixable. It is a transformation in a moment that is equally ephemeral and enduring.

* * *

Modern/Postmodern Dance, Eugenio Barba, and the Body

Butoh as a practice draws on many art forms from around the globe. It merges these ideas, relying on flexibility in the ratios of its various blendings. Butoh was influenced by modern dance, specifically the work of Mary Wigman who was influenced by and studied with the eminent movement philosopher, Rudolf Laban. Wigman is credited as the founder of expressionist dance and as a pioneer of modern dance (Funkenstein 828). While butoh breaks from modern dance in some ways, it is still largely couched in modern dance, though some may refer to it as postmodern. The writings of Eugenio Barba work to bridge the gap between "Oriental" and "Western" theatre by reassigning them the names "North Pole" and "South Pole" (Barba 13), thus resisting traditional categorization and opening the possibility to look at this distinction differently. While Barba's work is intellectualizing, it is embedded deeply in performance ontology and allows for fluidity making it seem a more comfortable fit for butoh than much Western critical thought. By looking at what is meant by modern versus postmodern dance, how Wigman "does" dance, and Barba's theories, the ways in which butoh and Western dance intersect are made visible.

According to Michael Kirby, in distinguishing modern dance from postmodern dance, one must look at the form and the intent of the creator.

Kirby ponders Merce Cunningham as an artist who has not broken from modernity, though his methods of separating movement from music was a step in that direction. He notes Cunningham continually uses “dancy” movements in order to make the dance aesthetically pleasing. This type of dance places value on movement, favoring one type of movement over another based on a determination of which looks best. Postmodern dance does not apply these sorts of standards, but is concerned with the interior of the dancer. In postmodern dance, meaning is not stressed and statements are not issued. In contradistinction from modern dance, postmodern dance is not about anything but is concerned with movement as an end in itself (Kirby 225-7). Through this basic definition of postmodern dance, a contrasting definition of modern dance emerges. It is possible to place *butoh* in either category, therefore, from a definitional standpoint; it may be useless to try to fit it into either one of these Western groupings. Turning to Mary Wigman for further definition is helpful.

Wigman explored spirituality and expressivity on stage through her use of constructed characters. Resisting being viewed as the objectified woman dancer “Wigman denied objectification by obscuring her body and staring back at her audience” (Funkenstein 826). A pioneer of modern dance in Germany, she created characters on stage consciously and critiqued gender through repetitive physical gestures that both cultured and gendered the bodies of her dancers. Wigman used improvisation as a method to make movement the forefront of her dances, emphasizing this by moving to silence or percussive sounds rather than music. Her dance school aimed to assist in the self-actualization of young women through community and the practice of dance (Funkenstein 828). In Funkenstein’s analysis, she claims the press depicted Wigman and her dances “as the embodiment of the liberating physical expression for women” (829), while Wigman emotionally and spiritually affirmed the individual (Funkenstein 832). She argues that Wigman attempted to mend the Cartesian split between mind and body, rejecting the feminine association with nature and the masculine association with culture; instead, Wigman presents the female body *as* culture. In light of these principles including the attention to space, spirituality, representation, and the use of improvisation, it makes sense to put *butoh* in the category of modern dance rather than postmodern dance as it is concerned with meaning beyond movement itself. The character and body Wigman presents as culture rings true with notions of *butoh* being 1.) Specifically Japanese and; 2.) Bringing out of the interior of the dancer. However, as Eugenio Barba contends, these separations are not clear and fixed.

Eugenio Barba makes the distinction between types of performance not as “Oriental,” or “Eastern” and “Western,” but as “North” and “South Pole.” He writes that North Pole performers adhere to a set of rules according to the performance tradition in which they situate themselves. They begin their performance process by stripping themselves of their personality and as

such may appear to be less free. South Pole performers, on the other hand, create their own performance rules. Their departure point does not involve depersonalization, rather it relies on the specific and inherent gifts the individual possesses through ability, training, exposure, etc. This performer may appear freer, but is not easily able to create a craft they can continue. Barba finally asserts North Pole performers are freer, but only within the genre to which they subscribe; there is freedom in form. He argues that while the South Pole performer has freedom to cross borders, she can become entangled in and bound by her lack of specificity (Barba 13-4). The question in relation to Barba's theories in terms of this essay is: where does butoh fit?

Barba believes the multiple misunderstandings between performance forms can be productive by paying attention, not so much to the signs of genres, but to "the hidden technique and the vision of the craft which bring them alive" (14). He goes further, asserting: "neither do performers resemble each other because of their techniques, but because of their principles" (15). Determining technique as a specific use of the body, Barba notes that different cultures determine these techniques depending on the way they perform daily activities. These daily activities are transformed to present extra-daily activities. Barba proposes that daily activities communicate and extra-daily activities inform by putting the body into a form that is artificial in that it is artistic, yet it is still believable (16). In describing extra-daily activities, the pre-expressive connects the performer to their energy in an unmediated state. The divide between East and West is created when these ideas are translated from Asian performance into European languages, obscuring performance principles in this transfer (17-19). These understandings of a seeming cultural divide offer tools for dissecting the Western gaze on the Japanese body and may provide new points of entrée for analysis. This divide is given much power and it reinforces distinctions, rather than allowing for a fluid exchange while recognizing difference. Admittedly, there are ethical concerns of appropriation with Barba's barter system whereby groups willingly enter into an artistic exchange borrowing freely from one another. However, seen from outside of this performance, the critic's imposition of the east/west divide does not serve to examine an art form as it exists, but to compartmentalize and intellectualize it, making it an entity to be studied as something separate from its life in practice.

I am interested in Barba's assertion that performers resemble one another not in techniques, but in principles and what this adds to Hamera's contemplation of butoh as a lyrical form. Barba suggests looking not at apparent technique, but at what motivates that technique, the underlying principles and the connection to extra-daily energy. This move is helpful in determining what butoh is at the level of practice. It allows for a different read on the lyric movement of butoh artists than Hamera provides. If an underlying principle of butoh is in part a response to its "violent, spasmodic antecedents" as Hamera notes (55), we may read lyric movement as a

response in an effort to move away from this chaotic energy; to feel it, but to also understand, come to terms with, and ameliorate it. Attention at the level of performance principle rather than genre allows for this complication and resists a fixing of the form. Further there are some butoh dancers, Akira Kasai to name one, who are known for their quick movements. Barba suggests reviewing what underlies forms and connects them. Individual expressivity, spirituality, improvisation, and character creation underlie both Wigman's modern dance and butoh. Barba's North and South versus East and West makes sense when looking at these arts which, while always influenced by and influencing culture, are never representative of a distinct culture in isolation but are always hybrids. This understanding that delineation is not fruitful is part of what typifies butoh.

* * *

I make my way through the warehouse neighborhood, to the space where I will be training for the next six weeks. It is a non-descript door, and I am not sure I am at the right place. Yes, this is it. I walk in. The walls are bare and the wooden floor goes on for days. I feel calm here. There are a few people out on the floor stretching and rolling on the ground. I join. We begin to move through the space, feeling our feet against the floor. Imagining a connection through the wooden boards with the earth.

We drag and carve the earth with the tripod of our foot.

Breathe.

Feel the hara. The place below your navel where energy pools.

Tap into that energy. Move from it.

Feel it connect like an umbilical cord to another dancer and move with them.

Try to exchange energy back and forth.

Close your eyes and feel their body.

Give them your weight and take their weight in return.

The more I learn about and practice butoh the less I know about it. The less I am able to tell someone what it is. I think this is a sign of a good art form. It is ineffable. But it can't be completely incommunicable. I want to know what it is based on, what the creators of the form intend, even if that is not what butoh is anymore.

* * *

Butoh

Butoh is a Japanese dance form created in the 1940s by two dancers, Kazuo Ohno and Tatsumi Hijikata, as a reaction to the post-war climate and effects of the atomic bombs (Ohno). Kaija Pepper cites the 1959 performance of *Kinjiki*, by Hijikata as the debut of butoh, describing it as a "Japanese avant-dance form" (79). Butoh is a blending of traditional forms of Japanese theatre,

performance art, and German expressionist dance. As Owen O'Toole notes: "Butoh is a modern Japanese dance-theater form, born of the atom bomb and Japanese theater, Noh and Kabuki. Alternating grotesque and beautiful, Butoh is a 'body art' evoking scenes from mythic stories of creation" (20). Until the emergence of butoh, Japanese dance and theatre had been systematic with strict rules and definitions of what one should wear and how one should move, not unlike ballet. Butoh deconstructed these forms. Rather than having a specific style, it took a freer approach, allowing its dancers to express experiences that live dormant in their bodies, both individually and collectively as an effect of the dropping of the atom bomb. Butoh was, and is, a way of bringing the inside out; expressing interior tensions through dance; bridging the mind/body split (Ohno).

While butoh does not embrace vocal expression in performance through words per se, it uses the voice as a suggestion of emotions through nonverbal sounds. However, in the rehearsal process, it relies heavily on language. In *Kazuo Ohno's World: From Without and Within*, Kazuo Ohno and his son Yoshito Ohno describe the process involved in creating a dance. Importantly, they note that "from its inception, butoh has been a living art and the essence of life is change" (6). On language and its connection with butoh we turn to the rehearsal process, which is a long period of, as Ohno would say, mining the body's strata. He urges the dancer to probe deeply into the subconscious with language. Language is an indispensable tool for creating dance. Before creating a piece, one must excavate his/her body with the written word, stripping away layers of the self one by one in order to tap into the depths of the psyche. This peeling back allows the inward journey to become visible in performance. This process is a type of research which informs the body in performance, but is not explicitly seen or heard onstage.

There is no instruction for specific ways of moving in butoh, there is no plié, no relevé, no first, second, etc. positions. Rather the dancer's movement is viewed as phenomena already deeply ingrained in their system pre-choreography, and presented by the body allowing new moves to be born in rehearsal and performance, resisting a classified set of steps. For butoh to be effective, cognitive control needs to be in close alignment with intuition. In other words, the mind and body should work in concert. Once a dancer moves too much into thought, life is lost. Butoh performance has a limited framework created by the dancer. This framework remains open and fluid, allowing the dancer to interact with the universe created through his/her body. Like postmodern dance, movement is the focus and each new piece has new moves to match the ideas as in modern dance, as opposed to ballet which tries to fit new thoughts onto classic forms. As opposed to an invented framework onto which content is layered, the actualization of the butoh skeleton is shaped by the content of the bodily excavation done in rehearsal (Ohno).

Tatsumi Hijikata died in 1986 and Kazuo Ohno is now 102 years old (likely 103 by the time this essay goes to press). The form has been carried on by students of the two masters and, because of its informal technique, it has been abstracted. I have studied butoh with Akira Kasai, Yoshito Ohno, Katsura Kan, Eiko and Koma, Diego Piñón and others. Every teacher I have studied with and every dancer I have danced with explains butoh and its philosophy a bit differently. Techniques for creating performances vary greatly across the spectrum of pedagogies and, because of this, various performances of butoh may appear disparate. In addition, as butoh has influenced Western dance and performance, it has mutated into more of an influence on performance than a pure form.

* * *

I walked in the room to see a man, small in stature without an ounce of unrefined muscle on his body. He looked at me in non-judgment. We explored the shadows and the light, the internal and the external, we did our dance of the broken heart. We stood and then we dropped, sometimes sunk, sometimes plummeted to our seats, and then to our backs. We turned over on our stomachs, bringing our arms into our bodies, between our legs. We rolled over onto our backs, splaying our arms and legs, opening our bodies to the floor and sending ourselves out through our chests. We repeated this motion and then we stood. And we repeated. Across the floor. From one end to the other. And then we came back. We cultivated extraordinary energy. We were creative with every expression around us, supporting one another, staying in touch with a sense of purpose and focusing on being present. There are emotions that everyone can feel. There are dances that every person can dance.

This is butoh. This is where we dig into the depths of our psyche and we find those things we have either dealt with and left behind or repressed. We find our heartaches, our joys, our laughter, and tears. I let my body feel that tension, fear, exhaustion, and confusion of that day in 2001, when I searched for my friends, and walked fifteen miles in a circle. I don't let myself experience that often. I don't talk about it in my daily life. I have made that a rule. But it lives in my body, hidden. And I let sound come out, transforming as it leaves me from a scream to a cry to a sigh. I see the images of the ghosts on the street and feel my body move in response to them at once destroyed and rebuilt. But I also remember rocking on the floor in a fetal position, or just clutching my knees and swaying and I do this to find comfort and it comes back. The muscle memory brings coziness and pleasure and I move to a different feeling and movement. But it is still there. This has not been therapy or an exorcism. It is an excavation.

We find these things where they live in our bodies. We allow them to get bigger and let ourselves go, expressing this moment in our dance, this point where we relinquish control. We add voice. It is heart-wrenching and

life-affirming at the same time. We cry and smile and resurface what was just under the water. It is an analysis of what exists in the self. An expansion, an expression, an extension. From this I know I want to extend myself in butoh, and I long to learn more.

* * *

Japanese Theatre History and the Avant-Garde

David Goodman posits, “rejection of the past and opposition to tradition are hallmarks of the avant-garde” (250). Peter Eckersall echoes Goodman in his assertion regarding the aim of the avant-garde as “nothing less than to bring about a revolution of everyday life by aesthetic means – to transform the modern world” (225). In Japanese theatre and dance, however, the past and tradition have not been solely discarded, but have often been recuperated and transformed to create relevant aesthetics for their given epoch. As pointed out by various authors (Eckersall, Goodman, Pellegrini, Sorgenfrei), Japanese avant-garde artists were influenced greatly by, and engaged with, the foreign West and its corresponding art movements such as Futurism, Dadaism, Surrealism, and the political thoughts of Marx. While being affected by Western thought, “Japan’s experience of modernity is an occurrence of singular intensity [that] is widely acknowledged [as such]” (Eckersall 225).

Japan’s most successful avant-garde art forms have been nostalgic in that they are either a return to or a rupture with the past. David Goodman leads us chronologically through a study of *kabuki*, pre-war and post-war *shingeki*, to a settling in *angura* in the 1960s. *Kabuki* was based in Japanese religious spirituality. It was not anchored in realism and was performed in sacred spaces, not in public spaces of the secular world, but in territories where the transcendent quality of the art form would be enhanced by the possibility of the appearance of spirits of the dead. As the influence of modernism began to shroud Japan, *Kabuki* was forced to transform itself in order to be placed in a more empirical history rather than the spiritual one it had known (Goodman 251-2). However, it was unable to jettison or completely veil the religious aesthetic of its roots, never developed into a modern theatre, and was considered, along with “other traditional arts to be outmoded and feudal” (Eckersall 229).

The modern theatre, unlike *Kabuki*, was scientific and progressive. As Goodman notes, “Modern theatre developed in Japan, therefore, not as a creative modification of pre-modern tradition, but through a rupture with it” (252). *Shingeki* (meaning “new theatre”) was the modern Japanese theatre movement led by Osanai Kaoru, and it “appealed to him because it gave rise to a sense of interiority; the complexities of individual agency and selfhood were depicted on the stage” (Eckersall 229). Pellegrini sites the institutionalization of *shingeki* as the peak of Japanese avant-garde

performance, “the staple of which was mimetic realism” (88). Osanai’s construction of shingeki was a hybrid of traditional and modern theatre and became very dance-like. It moved theatre out of traditional religious spaces and into public/secular spaces. Shingeki created a model to work with and away from for butoh artists Kazuo Ohno and Tatsumi Hijikata. Osanai used European expressionism as a method for recapturing the traditional, pre-modern theatre of Japan without surrendering completely to Kabuki (Goodman 253-4). Ohno and Hijikata followed suit, being influenced by said expressionism but also desiring a return to spirituality. This new theatre arose from a predominantly European influence. However, it carved into this influence a different Japanese history “with a memory of their long theatre history inscribed in the physicality of the actors and the minds of the theatre public” (Eckersall 230).

Post-war Shingeki was rapidly expansive, but this led to a new repertoire of realist plays. Younger avant-gardes artists, like Kan Takayuki, saw this as a negative move towards homogenization. They “identified shingeki as a particular paradigm that committed its participants to a linear understanding of history with an implicit teleology” (Goodman 256). They, like Western modern dancers who rejected ballet, rejected the decadence they saw as deeply ingrained in the form. They saw Shingeki as an institution that needed to be transcended and aimed for a new movement which rejected the structure and would “use the pre-modern imagination to transcend the modern” (Goodman 257).

This new movement was called *angura*, meaning “underground.” Angura reclamation of pre-modern forms classified the Japanese avant-garde as traditionalist in a sense which was apparent in the attention given to temporality, space, and performance styles. It is the movement from which butoh emerged. Angura moved theatre back into spiritual spaces. It refocused modern theatre on the body of the actor and allowed exploration of the effects on the Japanese body in the aftermath of the war, rejected linear time, and recuperated the shamanic properties of the performer that were characteristic of Kabuki. Angura signaled a new direction, or rather a nostalgic notion, of bodily focus. Angura aimed to shock and critique the bourgeoisie and gave attention to the proletariat body (Goodman 258-62). It was deployed internationally and is what most Westerners think of when they ruminate on representations of the Japanese avant-garde. As the movement which gave rise to butoh, Goodman notes, “angura may well have been the Japanese theatre’s final avant-garde” (263).

Here I return to Hamera’s argument regarding the use of *ma* as a lens for analyzing butoh. While Hamera finds *ma* useful, she also finds it problematic. Noting that the process of *ma* is not unlike the “process/reaction involved in reading non-narrative, imagistic performance art pieces and is in keeping with many readings and reflections on butoh” (59), she sees butoh as a reaction against the traditional arts of which *ma* is a cornerstone. However, if we

accept the tracking of the Japanese avant-garde outlined above, *ma* and its religio-aesthetic connotations no longer pose the same problems. Situated firmly within the *angura* movement butoh would be in part a return to this very aesthetic. Butoh in its blend of expressive dance and its return of performance to spiritual spaces could call for precisely the type of critique *ma* provides. I agree with Hamera that *ma* is an effective way to analyze butoh. Attention to both time and space, and locating meaning in the gaps is important to the understanding of butoh as the performer and likely part of what contributes to the lyrical quality that Hamera attributes to it. Hamera's only problem with the use of *ma* is that she believes butoh is trying to deconstruct its philosophies. With the revised view of butoh as situated within *angura*, an art movement that attempts to reclaim spiritual aspects of the Japanese aesthetic, *ma* can be used to its full potential.

* * *

Studying with Kan was much harder than butoh I had experienced thus far. I could not easily find the emotion through the dance and it wasn't about tapping into it to create the dance. We would work for a while on a set of choreography, and would play with making it bigger or smaller, discovering ways we would move energy like this. We would break off and work individually. You would move with some simple choreography to start and then expand it, and pair it with another dancer, and then three at a time would get up and move how he told you. As if you were a puppet. And there was something demeaning about this, yet at the same time it seemed to make the dance make a lot of sense. It seemed to give more control to the body to call up any sort of relation to an emotion or a thought or a feeling. It seemed less like you were trying to locate a story in a specific part of your body, and more like letting your *body* tell *you* the story. It was not unlike a Western dance class. It was similar in that there was a fourth wall, you were performing for the teacher and the other students, and you were being told what was good and what was not. I felt pressure to perform. But also, through this discipline, I was discovering stories rather than searching them out. As I moved, and repeated movements, sweating and exhausting myself, I began to find meaning and made sense out of movement that did not come from an origin of narration. What does this look like and does it matter?

* * *

Viewing Versus Performing

Concentrating on how butoh is viewed rather than how it is performed misses some nuances of the form. The individual performance of butoh is often quite spiritual. However, I am aware that writing about butoh from the side of performance also misses things that a critical eye will see. Therefore

I am not attempting to undermine Hamera's argument, which has given me a great deal to contemplate. I am suggesting that by writing about *butoh* through viewing, she cannot address *butoh* in all of its nuances. This critique is similar to dance scholar Susan Leigh Foster's critique of Judith Butler.

As elaborated in theories such as Judith Butler's, performativity focuses on the historically specific constellation of reiterative and citational patterns and the regulatory systems that interpellate the subject, and not any single or deliberate acts of individuals. But for Butler it is difficult to envision how either performance or performativity extends beyond the verbal realm into non-verbal dimensions of human action. (Foster 137)

Foster notes that, while Butler pays attention to gestures, even in her writing about *Paris is Burning*, a film focusing on vogue as a dance form specific to drag culture,

[. . .] she never examines the eclectic movement vocabularies or the various kinds of mastery and control over those vocabularies that are displayed. She considers the relationship between pedestrian and stage identities without actually detailing the ranges of exaggerative and ironic gestures used in each site. (137)

In some ways I believe Foster's critique of Butler is similar to mine of Hamera, but not entirely. Hamera does attend to the "eclectic movement vocabularies" (137) and a range of movements, though she mostly generalizes instead of looking at "deliberate acts of individuals" (137). In her noble project to be culturally responsible and accountable for abuses or internalizations of power, all valid and important points which deserve further study, she does not pay attention to the actual individual human practice of *butoh*. In her attempt to focus on dance viewed as culture and community building, parts of the dance escape her analysis. As I have noted, it is possible to interpret the lyrical movement as resistant in that it is expressive and not what one would expect as a movement category with the atomic bomb as an antecedent. Expected movements would be flailing and spasmodic as Hamera points out. But that does not suggest to me that lyrical movement would be the result of an internalized Western gaze. It would suggest the expression of feelings rather than physical reactions, a coping with these feelings, and a willingness to live in the spaces between movements typified by *ma*; where the meaning is found. Furthermore, Hijikata and Ohno, like their Western contemporaries such as Kaprow who Hamera cites, were also trying to expand their medium and developed their own distinct branches of *butoh*. They were dancers before they came to *butoh*. They were not exporting *butoh* during their development of *butoh*, though they were importing their own studies of European dance and blending it with their own Japanese aesthetic. Because of this the notion that a gaze was being internalized seems to be an imposition on the part of the Western critic. But, again, if Hamera's project is to understand how *butoh* is viewed, it seems logical that she would make this claim. It is at the level of the practice, that it doesn't quite fit.

While similar elements often appear in butoh across performances, it is dangerous to classify it in those stylistic terms. Dancers and dance scholars have always been worried that “codified techniques, like Martha Graham’s will diminish over time as individual steps are lost or misinterpreted. With a non-technique-based art like Butoh, the danger is that its spirit will curdle into a set of stylistic clichés – all aesthetics, no guts” (La Rocco). Vangelina, a New York based butoh artist asks, “How can we allow Butoh to evolve, and not preserve it as if it were in a museum?” (La Rocco). Paul Bartlett echoes her, “It’s hard to talk about it, and I think that’s why it’s a great art: you can’t just tell someone what Butoh is” (La Rocco). Brechin Flournoy of the now defunct San Francisco Butoh Festival also discourages mummification: “The advancement in this country for Butoh will have to come from exposure to other dance forms, and art forms, as happened in Japan” (La Rocco). From the mouths of its artists, everything about butoh resists routinization. Thus it is impossible for it to exist as it did when it began, but perhaps that is its beauty. Most artists refer to themselves as butoh-influenced, avoiding claim of the weighty term: “Japanese masters stress that students must find their own Butoh, a way of moving true to each body, and culture” (La Rocco). Butoh is considered by some to be an art form that is current to the present-day culture from which it emerges, more of a feeling or way of being, than an aesthetic. Many consider hip-hop to be America’s butoh.

So how to answer the question, “What is butoh?,” and how to write about it? I am tempted to say, “Don’t.” Or, perhaps more fairly, “Leave huge gaps, refusing to essentialize, or classify.” But the former is not going to help anyone understand why I think it is so important, or to gain legitimacy for the form. Or maybe it is as Claudia La Rocco and others suggest, “Perhaps this is the fate of all avant-garde work; to solidify into tradition or disperse” (35). The best answer for me, right now, would be to turn to the artists for a collage of what makes butoh. Perhaps even more than the sanctioned butoh dancers like Ohno or Hijikata whose words on the topic have been documented, we should turn to emerging butoh dancers. This is why I am writing about it and I am aware that this is only a beginning; new artists need to write their philosophies of the form too. But I have been frustrated by what I have read and, though I don’t know that I necessarily contribute a “better” outlook, I can at least contribute from my experiences of the form and studies with prominent artists. But this question of how to write about it remains an important one in performance studies as we are constantly struggling to write about performance, realizing that once we document it it is something other than performance. In many ways writing this essay for me, has been much like trying to pin down butoh. It is impossible. Once it is pinned down, it begins to fold in on itself and become unhinged. The more I study it, and the more I practice it, the less I “know” about it. It is the ineffable, the ephemeral that continually escapes the grasp at every turn. It exceeds my words and yet I must try to put it into words. The more

arguments I buy into, the harder I reject them and the less I believe. And that includes my own arguments. Still, I resist a museum model of butoh and oppose turning it into an artifact.

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