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THE PROBLEMATICS OF BUTOH AND THE ESSENTIALIST TRAP

William Marotti

What is deadly about the interpretation of art, moreover, even philosophically responsible interpretation, is that in the process of conceptualization it is forced to express what is strange and surprising in terms of what is already familiar and thereby to explain away the only thing that would need explanation.

– Theodor W. Adorno, “Looking Back on Surrealism”

The dance/performance genre that has come to be referred to as “butoh” did not initially emerge as a recognizable style; indeed, there is general agreement that the early performances of butoh were chiefly distinguished by their anti-formalistic nature.¹² Even accepting the frequent canonical equation of butoh’s origin with Hijikata Tatsumi and his works from 1959’s *Forbidden Colors* (*Kinjiki*) performances (in May and in September) onward, the performances in the 1960s can hardly be encompassed by a singular stylistic definition.³ The point of origin itself is a retrospective, genealogical presumption, obscuring the historical process in which butoh emerges as the product of a complex series of experiments by a number of interrelated performers. These performers in turn were part of a remarkable period of artistic productivity from the late 1950s to the early 1970s that was mediately related to the wider historical dynamics of the period. Butoh in its experimental naissance emerged as part of a wider critical problematics of representation and of the body, in which artists working in varied media and performance genres strove to give shape to sensibilities that were historically new, though often echoing Taisho and early Showa artistic productivity and contemporary international developments.

It is thus a tremendous tragedy that the richness of butoh’s complex development and experimental content has tended to fall victim to approaches that displace this historicity, obscure its problematics, and dull its criticality. In the worst instance this can amount to a reading of butoh that sees in it merely an instance of the signification of the eternally identical, based on an idealized conception of racio-cultural essence. This meta-discourse flattens butoh into a detemporalized, dehistoricized thing, stripping butoh’s distinctiveness to make it simply another item in a catalog of de-historicized proofs of the continuing manifestations of unchanging essence. Imagined as a defense against historical change and loss, this meta-discourse is itself an agent of this destruction, obliterating histories while at the same time working to guarantee the status quo in the service of capital and the modern super-state. To disentangle butoh from this discursive emptying and return to butoh as a historical problem necessitates recontextualizing the

discourse on and of the body within which *butoh* is situated, for it is here that *butoh* becomes re-appropriated.

Butoh and the problematics of representation

To understand *butoh*'s emergent anti-formalistic recourse to the body in the late 1950s/early 1960s, one needs to look to other related forms of artistic productivity at the time, particularly in regard to issues of representation and action. Akasegawa Genpei has written on the remarkable series of unadjudicated exhibitions that were the Yomiuri Indépendant-ten. They had taken place yearly since 1949, but around 1960 there had come to be a change in consciousness in the participating artists. This was expressed in an overall shift in emphasis from two-dimensional works such as paintings, to incorporating textured substances and found objects as projections from the painted surfaces, and finally to three-dimensional, Marcel Duchamp-style examinations of stand-alone *objets* [*objete*]. As described by Akasegawa,

Had we not discovered the minimum separation between painting and real life? . . . I held in my hand the explosive force to fuse fiction and the real world and I could foresee that flat and closed pictorial space could now be twisted out into three dimensions. At first, our timid efforts to protrude further from the pictorial surface progressed rapidly. Wood, rope, shoes, and cooking pans were all used. Then steel ribs, car tires, scrap metal were brought into play; the protrusion leapt from 17 centimeters to 30, and then on to 1 meter. This soon went beyond the bounds of what the picture surface could support and the projections began to fall off. In this way the picture was left behind and we began to look at different objects lying on the floor. It was by doing this that we learned what an *objet* was.

Akasegawa 1985, 86

The image is that of a progression in which the formalized artistic representation elongates and extrudes itself into the world before both artist and viewer, or in other words, a movement from representation to *embodiment*.

The uncanny *objet* emerged as the predominant technique of the artists of the Yomiuri Indépendant-ten, expressing a hope to close the gap between representation and reality, between art and life, to facilitate the exploration and penetration of the everyday – that is, to enable artistic *action*. This desire went so far as artists putting their own bodies directly into the works, which they could then inhabit as uncanny *objet*. In this way they could mediate their own existence through the artistic form to take advantage of its short-circuit of art/life, representation/reality. This was the “happening,” in which the artistic activity and the artists themselves became part of the artworks, rather than being separated by a process/product relationship.

What I would like to emphasize about this well-known practice, however, is its close kinship with the *objet*; it was thanks to the investigative practice of the *objet* that the happening's transgression of normal artistic practice was able to take on its particular sense. Thus Akasegawa's notorious “model 1000-yen bill” project, an experiment on the nature of money and its role as an *objet* at the intersection of capital exchange and the state, shared an awareness of the same concerns exemplified by the performance works of Kosugi Takehisa, Kazekura Sho, and others (who included their own bodies as part of their submitted works at the Yomiuri Indépendant-ten), or by the activities of “happening”-oriented groups such as Neo-Dada or Hi Red Center. They expanded the Duchampian concept of the *objet* to extend their work beyond formalized representational modes to critical interaction with the world.

The body of the artist, refigured as an uncanny, performing body, worked to exceed the ordinary parameters of expressibility, parameters that Akasegawa found to originate in a hegemonically controlled space of representation at the intersection between capitalism and the modern state (Akasegawa 1970b, 125–126; Akasegawa 1970a, 39). Of course, other artists did not necessarily come to this conclusion about the source of the problem (Akasegawa was certainly aided in this regard by his being prosecuted by the state for this art project). Yet the idea of circumventing representational limits – limits between art and life, between representation and reality, between artist and action – formed a central problem across a wide range of artistic endeavors, well beyond the few examples I have raised here. It was through this problematic that artists approached any of the myriad wider concerns that they wished to address; yet, moreover, this problematic was itself recognized as indissociable from these concerns.

Butoh's emergence thus needs to be recognized along with these other artistic activities, not in terms of proximity to Anpo or its partaking in some sort of dubiously constructed ideal “Zeitgeist,” but as part of a broad problematic being expressed within an artistic sphere.⁴

Butoh's development ought to be seen as one important part of the exploration and development of this problematic. This is not to take anything away from the fascinating experimentalism that came to be known as butoh. Rather, it is to allow for a richer and better-historicized appreciation of both butoh and these other related developments in art, one in which they might both be better illuminated.

Butoh of course is about a problematics of the body; but this problematics cannot be discussed ahistorically without obscuring its nature. If we look at the butoh approach to the performing body in terms of this wider problematic as sketched out above, butoh's anti-formalism and experiments in expressibility begin to be understandable in themselves, in a way that tended to elude contemporary observers. Indeed, that conceptual elusiveness that emergent butoh is so notable for can be read as part of the problematics of experimentation itself, part of this wider artistic search to give adequate expression to sensibilities which were as new as the situations that had given rise to them.

Butoh's distinctiveness lies in working out the experimentalism through the performing body itself (although sets, backdrops, props, costuming, and the like were an important part of butoh performance). The performing body was both a kind of uncanny *objet* and site (*ba*); through that site, butoh practitioners tried to give rise to something new, an image coming through the body that might evade its hegemonically controlled representation to register *something not yet said*.

As in the “happenings,” butoh performance as a kind of inhabited *objet* brought the artist into its uncanniness. One can see in its performances evidence of a kind of desire by the practitioners to bring themselves through the performance, and into the world, transformed. They attempt a leap across the gap between art and life, representation and reality, to enable a kind of artistic action and, conversely, a kind of “becoming” on the part of the artist.

An integral part of the questing that was retrospectively given the designation “butoh” was the search not only for adequate means of expression, but for that which was to be expressed itself. The performing body of the artist was to be the site of this expression, but because it always pointed beyond performance itself to some sort of *remaking* (*tsukurikaeri*); its nature was thus necessarily unclear.

Thus the body in early butoh registered a kind of productive excess, both in form and in content. The eroticism of butoh appeared through a kind of pleasurable excess spilling out into action. This excess dramatically transgressed norms of sexuality and of gender, subsuming the latter to a kind of devouring, violent desire. Yet this very quality of excess also allowed photographer and filmmaker Hosoe Eikō to provocatively treat the inexpressibility of the atomic bomb in his strangely sexual 1960 film, *Heso to genbaku* (*Navel and A-Bomb*). In the work, Hosoe

filmed a number of performers who were part of the formative butoh nexus (including Hijikata and Ohno Yoshito). In this way, the latent possibilities opened up by butoh acquired critical and artistic expression in another medium, film.

Butoh and the assumption of identity

As we have seen, the body in butoh was part of an unsolved, emergent problematic, being broadly expressed in a variety of artistic means. Yet even as this problematic was being falteringly first expressed, it was quickly enclosed and subsumed within a hegemonic representational sphere. This came in the form of what Harry Harootunian has referred to as a “national poetics”: an ideology of racio-cultural identity and an “endless present” deployed ultimately through the postwar democratic state to displace the criticality of artistic and cultural productivity of which butoh had been a part, excluded in favor of affirming the status quo (Harootunian 1993, 215–216). In its grasp, the body as a focus of inquiry as presented in butoh was forced into a self-apparent bastion of identity, of “Japaneseness.” An *a priori* was substituted for the question itself, the problematic collapsed into a mere consideration of bourgeois identity, with the answer assumed already.⁵

Whereas in butoh the body might be a kind of inhabited *objet*, opening the way to artistic action and the registration of something not yet imaged, the fantasy of the singular “Japanese body” makes “bodily objects (*karada no taishōbutsu*)” appropriate to its vision. Such body objects then can only register this supposed unchanging singleness as moments of its instantiation. It also carries within it the most virulent, racist definitions of “Japaneseness,” for what is a distinctive Japanese body if not a *racially* distinct body? If this performing body is to instantiate racial identity and national “essence,” it becomes reduced to the merely existing, and the sign of the existing (*aru koto* – that which is). Thus, rather than being an undecided, open site for new potentialities, the body becomes the foreclosed sign of a presumed sameness, whose expressivity fundamentally reduces to statements about shared “essence.” In this context, butoh becomes safe for the essentialist pseudo-critic, who no longer runs the risk of being surprised by anything unfamiliar. With everything reduced to this assumed “essential” content, butoh goes from being provocative and challenging to something whose safety and harmlessness is secured.

With the problem of the body elided, butoh as productive exploration becomes but a circular process, in which what was presumed at the beginning is “discovered” again and again. Yet butoh’s practitioners did not necessarily accept this short-circuiting of their expression. Even Hijikata himself maintained a certain ambiguity against the stronger claims of identity. Even the title of the 1968 performance, *Hijikata Tatsumi and the Japanese: The Revolt of the Flesh* [*Hijikata Tatsumi to Nihonjin – Nikutai no Hanran*] implies a certain negotiation of identity, not a perfect consonance, in its “and” (*to*). The performance itself continued to embody the kind of carnivalesque, wild excess of eroticism and gender ambivalence for which early butoh was so notorious. Yet by gravitating towards these questions of identity, particularly in works from the early 1970s onward, butoh made itself open to co-optation and closure by the essentialists.

Important in this process were some of the people who had played important roles during the butoh genre’s formative years. Mishima Yukio became personally involved in butoh and especially with Hijikata after hearing of his *Forbidden Colors* performance’s borrowing of the title of his novel. While participating himself in a broader racio-cultural essentialist discourse, Mishima also served as one of the earliest informal commentators on butoh as the genre evolved. His influence in his role as associate/critic/commentator helped prepare the way for butoh’s culturalist subsumption. As it was for so many others, the question of the body was one of Mishima’s chief concerns in the sixties; his solution to the problem, though complex, nevertheless was based on a strong concept of racio-cultural essence. He was always eager to read (or misrecognize) butoh’s

provocateness in terms of his own evolving conceptualization of the problematics of the body, in turn helping to prompt further misrecognitions by others.

The turn to issues of local identity by such a major figure as Hijikata provided another avenue for butoh's recuperation. It came at a time in which great efforts were underway to undercut local activism with a culturalist discourse locating local identity within a quiescent, status-quo supporting concept of Japanese identity. Discussions by Shibusawa Tatsuhiko and others of Hijikata's so-called "return to Japan (Nihon kaiki)" in his works with overt Tohoku references were very much a part of this flow, as were critics' deployments of the vocabulary of contemporary nativist ethnology (*minzokugaku*). These all became staples of butoh "criticism" in the seventies, and not merely by ideologues, but as well by those who had been convinced that such discussions were truly getting down to fundamentals. Sometimes as part of this discursive turn, other times perhaps as a reaction to its reductionism, some commentators turned to the evocateness of vagueness and mystifications to try and reserve some remainder within butoh.⁶

In the early 1980s, Gōda Nario, one of butoh's major interpreters, wrote of his sense that there had been a gap between butoh and its criticism subsequent to the 1968 *Revolt of the Body* performance. He expressed his reservations as follows:

Considering Hijikata's career after that performance, one might say that it was a turning point; or that it should be understood as signaling a "return to Japan (*Nihon kaiki*);" or you might say that, as you'd expect from its subtitle, people just went wild over the body's revolt. . . . However, it now appears to me now that those of us who, with smug complacency, pointed out this dance as a turning point, or were ecstatic with enthusiasm, were actually being sharply rebuked from the stage.

Gōda went on to suggest his sense that the interpretations of a "return to Japan" . . . have never drawn near to the font of Hijikata's inspiration, or to the structure of Ankoku Butoh which corresponds to it" Nevertheless, Gōda recognized that "these criticisms had played a major role supporting Ankoku Butoh's formation" (Gōda 1983; Klein 1988, 83–84).

By this point, Gōda and some other serious butoh critics were willing to reassess their initial enthusiasms for the path butoh and butoh criticism had been taking. Yet butoh itself had also reached a point of respectability sufficient for it to become a topic of address for more directly essentialist commentators. A recent example came in the fifth issue of this very magazine (*Theatre Arts*). Nomura Yukihiko's strongly racially essentialist argument used Hijikata in an attempt to try to demonstrate how the racially unique Japanese body's natural emotive expressiveness ultimately dictated the form of Hijikata's dance. Nomura thus unified Hijikata's butoh with the grand pantheon of a racio-culturally *imagined* "Japanese Art" (*Nihon bijutsu*) (Nomura 1996). By the terms of Nomura's argument, (Japanese) bodily identity exists as an inescapable "fact"; he linked Hijikata by "feeling (*kanjimi*)" to its singular expression, essentially unchanged for millennia. Lost to this ideological processing, of course, is any sense that butoh might be about something other than repetition.

The stolen body of butoh

The fate of butoh in the hands of the pseudo-critics reveals the larger process by which the critical problematics of which butoh was a part became misdirected and enclosed. Postwar activism and experimentalism that threatened to end in social transformation was tamed by its subsumption by an inauthentic culturalism, one tied to the state, capitalism, and the status quo. As if by

sleight of hand, the tautological endless “rediscovery” of a presumed content was substituted for a process of creative investigation that was both open and critical. This culturalism promised to reveal the true fundamentals behind everyday forms, yet by foreclosing the possibility of arriving at an unpresumed answer, it redirected cultural productivity into the service of maintaining a status quo whose content would not be questioned.

Key to this process was the assumption of an absolute difference between “things Japanese” and its *presumed* Western other. Through this presumption, critical encounters hinting towards an unknown dialectical resolution could be reread as signs of absolute incompatibility, redirecting one back to the tautological rediscovery of “essence.” Thus the authentic criticisms by Natsume Sōseki, for example, become discarded as Sōseki himself becomes reread as a canonical sign of absolute difference and expresser of a “distinctly Japanese” sensibility. In the case of butoh, creative anti-formalism, having international roots itself, becomes rewritten as a rejection of Western dance techniques on the grounds of absolute bodily incompatibility; butoh is then imagined as the authentic expression in dance of this bodily distinctiveness. One might note that in both of these two examples, the search for distinctiveness curiously proceeds within the bounds of presumably universal but in fact eminently modern, historical concepts – literature and dance.

Although imagined to be an authentic protest against a Western-imposed modernity, the assertion of Japanese distinctiveness that is the hallmark of this culturalism is in fact deeply implicated within the very discourses that it claims to oppose. As Harry Harootunian points out (in the above-cited essay), the narratives of this national poetics perfectly complement the imposed definitions and goals of modernization theory, itself a postwar domestication of the imperialist/colonialist project. The distillation of purported essence from the cultural raw materials thereby narrativized reduces histories to fit safely within the boundaries of this narrative. Anything not in accord with its assumed goals is in turn discarded. Butoh, like any of the other items thus processed, reduces to a sign of the eternal same, part of an ideology of reassurance and acceptance. In this way butoh comes to assert the ideology that, as Harootunian puts it, “[the Japanese] have not yet become anything other than what they have been since the beginning of time in a world where everything else is changing” (Harootunian 1993, 221). For there to be a return to a truly critical butoh would require reopening the problematic that has been obscured with the abandonment of its history. Then perhaps the body in butoh, stolen by this culturalism, can be returned as uncanny *objet*, the site for a creative, critical experimentation whose ends are not already prescribed.

Notes

- 1 This chapter was translated by the author from “*Butō no mondasei to honshitsushugi no wana.*” *Shiatā ātsu* 8 (May 1997): 88–96.
- 2 For simplicity I will leave off brackets from the term *butoh*. Taken at a different level of abstraction, butoh is as consistent and ambiguous as any performance genre.
- 3 This is often amended to give credit to the Ohnos as co-founders, citing Ohno Kazuo’s *The Old Man and the Sea* (*Rōjin to umi*) performance in April of 1959, as well as the appearance of Ohno Yoshito (Ohno’s second son) in both *The Old Man and the Sea* and *Forbidden Colors*. His eldest son, Ohno Yukito, also performed in *The Old Man and the Sea*, though it has been generally forgotten.
- 4 Many contemporary observers in fact referred to some of these activities with the paradoxical label “anti-art,” symptomizing the confounding of forms that was the hallmark of this problematic.
- 5 In discourse, we can see this transformation effected in the increasing prevalence at the time of the term “*shintai*” over the previously favored “*nikutai*.” Both refer to the body, but *nikutai* more strongly connotes flesh, and excess. [Translator’s note: in the essay, “body” is rendered with the characters for “*shintai*,” but glossed as “*karada*.”]

- 6 In the context of this alternate, reductive discourse, the turn to vagueness has a different, potentially strategic valence than that prompted by *butoh* prior to this fixing of its conception, i.e., during its formative period. My objection to this tactic is that it too ultimately delivers up *butoh* to its co-opters: while denying the possibility of a fuller understanding, it remains blind to the fact that vagueness and mystification themselves play vital roles in the discourse of essence.

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