

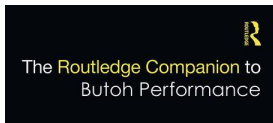
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Butoh Performance



Edited by Bruce Baird and Rosemary Candelario

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OHNO KAZUO

Biography and methods of movement creation¹

Lucia Schwelling (translated by
Charlotte Marr and Rosemary Candelario)

Childhood and his beginnings in dance

Ohno Kazuo was born October 27, 1906, in Hakodate, a seaport at the southern point of Hokkaido as the oldest son of the family. Hakodate was considered a very modern town in Northern Japan that is strongly influenced by the West. Ohno's parents were from relatively well-to-do families; his father's family worked in the fishing industry of the Northern Ocean. Even though his family lived through tough times every now and then, Ohno and his eight siblings grew up in a relatively comfortable home. When Ohno speaks about his family, he mostly talks about his own egotism and the boundless kindness of his mother. His main thoughts are thankfulness and guilt toward her, she who always had understanding for him until her death (Ohno 1989, 73).² He credits his tendency to speak in dream images to her influence because she would tell him ghost stories written by Lafcadio Hearn, which stimulated in him a visionary view of reality (Ohno 1989, 64). Her religiosity molded Ohno's life as well. At the moment when one of his younger sisters was struck by a train and mortally injured, his mother, who was at home, was said to have had a vision of a procession of Buddhist monks. As a follower of Amida-Buddhism, she took her kids to Christian services every now and then because there was no Buddhist temple in the vicinity of their town. Ohno was twenty-four years old when he was baptized, and the Christian faith has constituted the basis of his thinking ever since.

Ohno got a late start with his dance training, although he had decided years earlier that he wanted to go into movement education. After graduating from high school and working as a substitute teacher at an elementary school in Hakodate for one year, he went to Tokyo in 1926 to study at the Japanese Sports Club's School for Gymnastics (*Nihon tai'iku-kai taisō gakkō*, present-day Nippon Sports Science University). After finishing his studies, which were interrupted by fourteen months of military service, he got a job as gymnastics teacher at the private mission school, Kantō Gakuin, in Yokohama.

In Hakodate, Ohno had never seen a western-style dance or theatre performance. At the gymnastics school he got to know *neuer Tanz*. It was not this first encounter with western dance that was to become the guiding light for his future career, however, but rather an experience from shortly before graduation. On the initiative of a friend, Ohno went to a performance by the internationally acclaimed Spanish dancer, La Argentina,³ who had a guest appearance at the Imperial Theatre:

We sat in the last row of the third balcony of the Imperial Theatre, and from the first moment I was fascinated with the dance of La Argentina, her magic hit me like a lightning bolt. I can never forget this encounter.

Ohno in Haerdter and Kawai 1988, 57

Ohno was so deeply impressed that for the first time he felt the desire to become a dancer himself. Yet, this was only possible in 1933, after he had married and was awaiting a transfer to the Baptist Sōshin Girls School. In preparation for his new job, Ohno took classes in Ishii Baku's studio for a year. There he found himself a beginner among many renowned and respected dancers. . . . The following year Ohno saw Harald Kreutzberg perform, and was deeply impressed. Though, in contrast to the performance of La Argentina, he was not so much touched on the personal level but was in awe of Kreutzberg's skill and the connection between "inside" and "outside," form and expression (see Ohno 1989, 73–74).⁴ It might have been this connection with the "inside" that allowed Ohno to refer to Kreutzberg as a "teacher for life" even though he generally rejected technical training (Ohno 1989, 226).

In order to study the German import *Ausdruckstanz*, Ohno joined the Eguchi/Miya dance studio in 1936, where he soon advanced to teaching assistant. Even back then, he had already begun to distance himself from the lessons of his teachers and to communicate his own style. His second son and later dance partner, Yoshito, was born in 1938. In the same year, Ohno was called to active service again, and returned only in 1946 after his deployment to Manchuria and New Guinea. Besides his dance lessons, he also went back to teaching at the Baptist girl's school, a post he maintained until the early 1980s.

Ohno did not celebrate his stage debut as a student of Eguchi and Miya, but appeared as a guest in the show of Hijikata [Tatsumi]'s future teacher Andō Mitsuko. Soon after, in the fall of 1949, he gave a performance at Kanda kyoritsu kōdō Hall, on the basis of which Hijikata dubbed his dance "medicine dance."⁵ It was the first of four shows with several shorter pieces that Ohno presented before meeting Hijikata personally for the first time.

...

The years of *ankoku butō-ha* and the films of "Mr. O"

...

In retrospect, it was the death of his mother in 1962 that was the decisive experience in his development. Her last words allegedly were "a flatfish swims in my body," which Ohno interpreted a few years later as a bequest on which he should base his dance. He believed to discover with this flatfish, which rests nestled on the ocean floor until it suddenly sets itself in motion, the embodiment of "the gestalt of life itself" (Ohno 1989, 116). That is, in connection with the mother, the flatfish reflected the image of an embryo inside the womb, nurtured by the mother through the placenta.

From this image Ohno developed a complete "cosmology" by the end of the 1970s in which the womb was a microcosm of the evolution of the entire universe whereby the devotion of one's life to the creation of new life is central. He saw his role as a dancer to be to recognize the continuity of life and the related emotions such as gratefulness, guilt, etc., and turn them into movement.

Even though this way of thinking was only at its infancy during the early 1960s, and Ohno, like Hijikata, moved in circles of avant-garde artists (notwithstanding his middle class work and family life) he occupied from the beginning a singular position. On the one hand, the age difference and his already well-advanced personal style of movement made him an equal partner with

Hijikata, even though he worked under his direction. On the other hand, his concentration on his own “soul,” and his personal memories and emotions, produced a separation from the outside world and prevented his assimilation into a slowly growing company.

Thus, Ohno absorbed fewer influences in terms of style and method from other artists and art movements than Hijikata. As a proponent of improvisation, he even stood out from the younger dancers in the free experiments of *ankoku butō-ha*, because he actually possessed an individual movement vocabulary that evidenced neither his assimilation with the group nor borrowed movements from different dance styles. In extreme cases, his concentration on his “inside” was at times so complete that he entered his own world and would involuntarily extend the performance past the set time as he continued to dance between the rows of the audience.

During the time when Hijikata began to develop his method of “metamorphosis” with *Hangidaitōkan*, Ohno and his son both retired from the stage except for some guest appearances. Ohno describes the following years as a time of uncertainty. As much as he wished to continue his dance career, he was unable to create a new piece for the stage (Ohno 1989, 209). Yet, he did do three movies, and moreover, he taught butoh several times a week in a little studio near his house in Kamihoshikawa, a section of Yokohama.

In accordance with his rejection of technique, Ohno saw class only as assistance for finding one’s own personal dance. Therefore, he taught neither technique nor movement phrases, but let the participants improvise freely. One of his longtime students, Uesugi Mitsuyo,⁶ said that some classes remained in complete silence all evening. Often, he played records of different music styles from Bach to the Beatles, quoted from books or talked about people’s everyday lives, emotions regarding life and death, etc., out of which he slowly developed his own cosmology. When at the end of the class Ohno would prepare a meal in order to close the evening with conversation, Uesugi often found the transition from the imaginary universe to the real studio confusing (Uesugi 1994, 17).

Ohno’s class was more like a meditation session where music and spoken words were supposed to help [participants] abandon reason and thoughts about the appearance of one’s own body in favor of emotional experiences out of which movement could emerge. The real environment was mostly blocked out, depending on an individual’s readiness and ability to concentrate. Neither structure nor content of Ohno’s classes have significantly changed over the past twenty years, even though they have changed from being free of charge private lessons for relatively few students to relatively popular workshops with a large number of foreign participants who do not live in Japan for any extended period of time for whom an English translation is provided.

The movies mentioned earlier, *The Portrait of Mr. O* (*O-shi no shōzō*, 1969), *The Mandala of Mr. O* (*O-shi no mandara*, 1971), and *Mr. O’s Book of the Dead* (*O-shi no shisha no sho*, 1973–1976) were all directed by Nagano Chiaki. Ohno’s students also performed in the last two. For the most part, they were shot outdoors, for example, in the mountains, by the temples of Kanagawa and Gunma, and on the crater lake Shikotsu-ko in Hokkaido.

None of the movies had a story to it, rather, everyday movements were executed without any situational context, distorted through the costumes, white makeup, and props. Scenes in *The Portrait of Mr. O*, for example, include Ohno dressed as a woman in white riding around on a little motor bike, running through a temple garden with his long undulating hair in the rain, or wrapping up the bloody carcass of a fish in toilet paper. *Mr. O’s Book of the Dead*, again, presents him in front of a temple, sporting a wig and a loin cloth of flowers, while in other scenes the members of the company walk in a somewhat surreal procession through the countryside with artificial flowers in their hair, or Ohno sits with a lady’s hat and an umbrella in a wheelbarrow amidst a herd of pigs.

...
During these years, Ohno started to develop his aforementioned “cosmology” from personal experiences, memories, and thoughts that were instigated, at times, by reading or looking at images. Similar to Hijikata’s concept of the Japanese body, Ohno’s cosmology relied less on careful consideration than on the associative connection of individual motifs. While Hijikata adopted concrete forms from drawings, photographs, etc., and directly extrapolated techniques from the fine arts as design tools for his butoh, for Ohno, paintings and the like were more like triggers or projection screens for visions. Exemplary of this procedure are Ohno’s thoughts about a postcard that was likely decisive for the choice of the crater lake *Shikotsu-ko* as filming location:

When it was settled that I was going to be in Nagano Chiaki’s *Death Book of Mr. O* I happened upon a postcard of Shikotsu-ko in the middle of Hokkaido. As my eyes got pulled into the “moss gully,” I looked at it for a long time, and then, for no particular reason, I saw the figure of a highly decorated general who sat on a chair. . . . Gully and lake had melted into something like an angel, the landscape had a soothing impact on me. “In heaven, a couple becomes an angel” (Swedenborg). Meanwhile, Mount Taru-mae puffed smoke into the air like a person who is imperturbable.

*Ohno 1989, 154, ellipses in original*⁷

Ohno identified the angel with his dead parents, the general with his father, leading him to deduce a kind of communication with the dead. Such visions during everyday events became decisive aspects of Ohno’s further career. These visions not only motivated him to pursue certain themes, but also guided the production design of his works. It was not uncommon that Ohno felt guided on stage or during rehearsals by a foreign hand – like Mary Wigman’s “witch” – pushed onto the stage by a “monstrous” piano, facing an audience of dead people at the theatre, etc. This was how Ohno mystified everyday banalities and turned them into transcendental manifestations, something that became visible in his movement, too.⁸

Admiring La Argentina

Just like La Argentina’s performance tour fifty years earlier, it was another specific event that occasioned Ohno’s return to the stage. In 1976, he saw an abstract painting by Nakanishi Natsuyuki at an exhibit and suddenly saw the “gestalt” of La Argentina in it. At this point, Argentina had been dead for 40 years, and Ohno had never talked to her nor seen her again after that performance in 1929. The vision was even more overwhelming as he had often tried to conjure up the image of her, to no avail (Ohno 1989, 99–100). He took the unexpected “encounter” with La Argentina as an opportunity to return to the stage in order to show his high esteem for the dancer.

This admiration, based on the event at the Imperial Theatre so many years before was now mixed in with his view of the universe and a transfiguration in accordance with the Christian ideal of selflessness. Ohno saw La Argentina’s commitment for the art, for the revival and transmission of almost forgotten dances, as a contribution to creation she made, she who died so young and so selflessly devoted herself to the art for so many (Ohno 1989, 41). Ohno did not define “creation” as an event that was finished in the distant past, but as a retransmission of the juice and wisdom of life across generations.

The cornerstone for a further mystification was most of all the connection of Christian ideals and the veneration of the dead, which subsequently influenced Ohno’s works as well as his understanding of himself. This influence became apparent, for example, in the change of his studio name

to “Holy hall of the white grave” (*Hakurin seidō*). Additionally, one section of his planned homage to La Argentina was based on the memory of one of his students who had drowned in the ocean.

In 1977, Ohno celebrated his comeback at the Dai-ichi seimei Hall with an almost 90 minute long solo, *Admiring La Argentina (Ra Aruhenchīna-shō)*. Knowing that an evening of such magnitude needed a frame, Ohno asked for Hijikata’s and Ohno Yoshito’s assistance in the overall design of the show. Just like all of his works since then, *Admiring La Argentina* was only set in terms of its general structure and the characteristic movement vocabulary of each of the sections, while Ohno improvised specific movements and paths through space.

Admiring La Argentina began – reminiscent of his part as Divine – with Ohno’s entrance from the audience as an old woman. In fact, the piece from 1960 *Divīnu shō* (Divinariana) was integrated into the opening scene of *Admiring La Argentina* in a modified form, with the addition of “Birth and Death” (*Shi to tanjō*) as a subtitle. According to Goda [Nario], the costume was less shabby than 17 years previously. Another novelty was that Ohno raised both his hands for some gestures while he danced between the rows of the audience (Goda 1994, 21). Wearing various costumes, Ohno danced in sequence to organ music and live piano music by Bach, Puccini Arias, and Argentinean tangos. Although the full sound of the organ or the dramatic expression of the arias seemed to suggest big and wide gestures, Ohno’s movements were held to a minimum. Ohno wanted to let La Argentina live again through his dance without either trying to hide his own age or attempting to imitate the young Spaniard.

Unlike Hijikata’s method of metamorphosis, Ohno did not identify with La Argentina in a way that would eliminate his own identity, but concentrated on relationships that hinted at a takeover by a foreign identity. Ohno’s performance notes show that for the first section, with a change of his costume, he would be reborn as a young girl (La Argentina), shortly thereafter he would be born to La Argentina, and in yet another section he would take her inside of him. A takeover is also indicated by thoughts about his soul being picked up by “the chirping of little birds” or being “buried in a flower,” and equally that he thinks to be more beautiful than a flower he looks at, an idea that possibly refers to the connection between the improvisation motif and the dance (Ohno 1989, 106ff.).⁹

Even more than the premiere of *Admiring La Argentina* in Tokyo, Ohno’s real breakthrough came with his performance at the Nancy International Theatre Festival in 1980. During the festival the German director Werner Schroeter suggested the making of a film, in which Ohno improvised along a riverbank outside the city. Afterwards, Ohno went on a European tour that took him to Strasbourg, London, Stuttgart, Paris, and Stockholm. Ever since then, Ohno has accepted multiple invitations to performances, festivals, symposiums, workshops, presentations, etc., almost every year all over the world.

Audiences and critics in the West were particularly impressed with his seemingly natural androgyny and its aesthetic. Ohno’s fine and almost unnoticeable movements gave the impression of a fragility and proximity to death that had hitherto been unknown in dance, as described in the following performance review:

What Kazuo Ohno does has nothing to do with travesty. . . . Why be shocked when an old man copies the object of his reverence with only a few nuances? Death resonates in all his poses. When Kazuo Ohno . . . moves his slender body, . . . when he crouches, it seems as if a gentle breeze could blow him away like an autumn’s leaf, a morbid scent of chrysanthemums fills the air alongside his moving tenderness.

Fischer 1982, 21, ellipses in original

While butoh slowly became known in Europe as a new dance style (Kasai Akira and the group Sankai Juku also appeared for the first time in Europe at Nancy), Japanese critics evaluated

Admiring La Argentina as a new beginning in the history of butoh, which simultaneously indicated the end of Hijikata's *ankoku butoh*.¹⁰ On the one hand, Ohno's improvisational solos showed an alternative to the ongoing imitation of typical forms that had led Hijikata's group choreographies into a crisis. Even though *Admiring La Argentina* was produced by Hijikata, it became the piece that allowed Ohno to step out of Hijikata's shadow as a formative figure of butoh in his own right. On the other hand, Ohno was not representative of the younger generation, who like *Sankai Juku*, for example, emigrated to the West after their initial success. Ohno, as the older master and maverick, did not raise suspicions that he would adjust his dance to European tastes for mere populist reasons.

Although Ohno's work maintained a proximity to death, the concept of darkness, which had long been so characteristic for butoh, lost its significance. One reason is the association of the term with the early years of butoh, when Hijikata made social taboos and the dark landscape of northern Japan central themes of his dance. Moreover, Ohno's "cosmology" that was founded on motherly love did not see death as a taboo that needed to be broken, but as a fundamental condition of being alive. As Ohno solidified his cosmology, the image of the social outcast, as embodied in the prostitute Divine, lost its significance over the years. This is evident if you look at the progression of *Admiring La Argentina* where the performance of death in the first section becomes increasingly abstract. On the occasion of the opening night in 1977, a spectator remarked on the beginning section, subtitled "Commentary on Divine – Birth and Death," that Ohno "had deepened the darkness with every moment." As a culmination of the androgynous sense of the body in *ankoku butō*, he saw Ohno drown in a "pitch black lake," which he compared to the bed, soiled with excrement, in which Divine died (Nagao Kazuo in Ohno 1989, 269). For the audience in Nancy, it was less about the horror of such death, rather than a kitschy-beautiful performance of an elderly woman.¹¹ The change is also apparent in Ohno's notes from the 1980s, where he calls the beginning section merely "Birth and Death" while the allusion to Genet's Divine is dropped (see also Ohno 1989, 106). Finally, about a 1992 performance of *Admiring La Argentina* in which Ohno was dressed in a magnificent black-and-white gown, Goda wrote that Ohno depicted an "abstract death" instead of the miserable death of Divine (Goda 1994, 21).

The consolidation of the "cosmology"

...
 Ohno developed his method over the next years on an increasingly abstract level, as we have already seen in regard to *Admiring La Argentina*. . . . The figure disappeared ever more frequently behind abstract terms such as creation, birth and death, or the dead. On one hand, the performance became more objective because it was derived from a more universal object, on the other hand, it was accompanied by a stronger focus on oneself.

...
 For a while, the concept of forgiveness determined Ohno's view of his relationship with his mother. In Tokyo, following the success of *Admiring La Argentina*, he dedicated the piece *My Mother (Watashi no okāsan)* in 1981 to her. Thus, all three themes that formed the basis for the elements of Ohno's cosmology came together: the veneration of La Argentina, his Christian faith, and love for his mother. This thematic development found concrete expression in the use of an artificial flower as a prop, the use of which in *Admiring La Argentina*, and even more so in *Call of Jesus* and *My Mother* expanded the symbolism to include love and forgiveness.

The aforementioned aspect of forgiveness in Ohno's relationship with his mother is based on the elevation of the mother role to one of self-sacrifice. He observed how she met his childish egocentrism with forbearance, which caused him to feel guilt mixed with gratefulness (Ohno 1989, 73).¹² Beginning with *A Little Table or the Fetus Dream*, Ohno integrated a little table (*o-zen*) in his works – traditionally used at important ceremonies like birth, marriage, etc., in Japan – and used it to symbolize the devoted mother. As such, for Ohno the table embodies the personal story of every single person, and in connection with the idea of forgiveness, he sees it also as a place of security.

For *My Mother*, Ohno ordered a table with one crooked leg in order to give the impression of instability and fragility. In the context of Ohno's "cosmology," where death does not signify the end of life but is an always present constant, the table's intentional imperfection can be interpreted as a symbol of Ohno's view of life. The very fact that Ohno uses the prop at the most disparate occasions, be it a short improvisation or a film, supports this idea. The identification with the mother's womb, in particular, is signified by a rope that Ohno used to connect himself with the table as if through an umbilical cord.

...

Minimization of movement

After he solidified his butoh in intellectual and structural terms, Ohno Kazuo began, especially after . . . *Water Lilies* (1987), to minimize the dimensions of his movements even further. This was less an attempt to adjust to his physical abilities but rather to preserve his concentration on the "soul." That is, in connection with the understanding that the focus on oneself is also the focus on all people, Ohno believed that movement that was too big or too fast endangered his ideal of the body-soul-unity, which requires that movements be directed by the soul. The effect of this minimization is described in a review of *Water Lilies* in Toronto:

The gestures are more implosive than explosive. It is the emotions that are on a grand scale, uplifted by the music (for example, Kathleen Battle singing Schubert), and the emotional nudity of the performers. It is remarkable that such small gestures can communicate such monumental emotions.

Gildiner 1990, C5

...

Improvisation basics

Because of Ohno's disposition to improvise, it is impossible to note *kata* or something similar for his movement. His method of working without any specification in regards to form nonetheless led to the development of characteristic properties of movements, which limit the movement vocabulary to variations of ever recurring poses, so that a sort of standardization becomes noticeable. In spite of the apparent differences between Hijikata's shaping [of movement] according to defined criteria and Ohno's free improvisation, it is possible to recognize similarities both in their approach to finding movement and in the effect.

One of the commonalities with Hijikata's method of developing movement vocabulary is, for example, showing specific images, which require a change to a new environment and perspective that lies outside the realm of everyday experiences, like the images of an embryo in its mother's womb or the tread of a deceased person. While for Hijikata this change of perspective constitutes

a mental “metamorphosis,” in which one’s own existence is replaced with the object of identification, in Ohno’s work this object serves as a starting point for the analysis of the relationship between one’s own existence, the object of identification, and its environment. Hence, movement is not a (predictable) coordinated reaction to an imagined sensory perception, but a manifestation of the analytical process whose continuation will be determined only at the moment of the initiation of movement:

“Understanding” must rise out of movement, movement must give rise to understanding. . . . I think the fact that movement emerges (shaped by the individual) is due to the relationship between the life force, the understanding of being alive, and the world in which we live.

Ohno 1989, 30–31, ellipses in original

Pictures serve as aids to make the relationships between birth, life, and death emotionally accessible. Ohno prefers to work with images that illustrate the possibility of living in seemingly adverse circumstances. Instead of dividing body and individual into single parts by giving them separate tasks to perform, his selection of images shows an individual integrated into the environment and equipped with all the essentials for life. The act of imagining physical contact with this environment or source of nourishment, as well as the consciousness of interdependence with one another is supposed to trigger emotions, which are subsequently transformed into movement. Conversely, moving the body can trigger emotions, which then deepen the understanding of the relationship and once again prompt movement. Ohno sees a dance like that as a continuous act of creation, supported by the will to live, while the entire body is an expression of the soul. When Ohno, in the face of the impossibility of ever grasping life as a whole, speaks of “puzzlement” [*konwaku*] as his technique (Ohno 1989, 35), he describes his ideal of a discovery process made visible, which does not have the objective of achieving a specific result.

Based on this principle, for example, the switch of perspective to that of an embryo does not necessarily lead to a dance in the pose of an embryo with strongly bent extremities, but to movements that express the emotions regarding the mother as the source of life. As an initiator of movement, emotion is a significant factor that has to prevent a particular dance becoming set or routine, even in the face of repeated rehearsals and performances.

Since I do not really rehearse movement that I would have to memorize, but always search for movements by way of improvisation, and those movements, even if they are the same ones, originate in terms of content from a rise in energy, I think it absolutely necessary to prevent any decline of that emotion. If it nevertheless wanes, one must endure and let oneself be spurred on by the boundless beauty of wilted flowers as an aspect [*sugata*] of life that has to do with the birth of life. . . . A dance as something weak that tries to pull itself upwards. Precisely a dance of wilting, I think. A bizarre combustion, as if one detailed and reassembled a junk car and made it run again. I would like to model myself on the birth of life.

Ohno 1989, 36 f., ellipses in original

On one hand, the abandonment of fixed forms allows for a performance without any risk in terms of dance technique, but on the other hand, it poses the danger of arbitrariness as well as failure of the required concentration. In February of 1992, Ohno experienced this himself when he alone had to carry the first evening of a four-day event “Dreams of 10 Nights” (*Yume jū-ya*) at the theatre Terpsichore (Terupushikōru) after his son got sick. After half an hour he suddenly

stopped the show announcing that he could not dance that day (Nakamura Fumiaki quoted in Ōno, Ōno and Nakamura 1992, 27).

Ono's perception of the global interconnection of life, just like Hijikata's reference to literary sources, does not come from careful consideration. Rather it consists of associative linkages of single phenomena from Ohno's personal experience, which he included in his "cosmology" as examples of universal phenomena. Consequently, several images tend to overlap or connect to image-chains with intersections of individual parts. At this point, Ohno's method meets Hijikata's "fragmentation" of the body and the simultaneous concentration on individual elements: The depiction of the entire universe through separate, individual experiences that can evoke different emotions stands in opposition to the simultaneous grasping of multiple images. For Ohno, this multiplication of tasks for the dancers results in the minimization or alienation of the representation, which deprives the audience of a specific interpretation. Here is an example of the overlap of images from "The Dead Sea" section of the eponymous piece. The section is based on the main motif of the piece, an unexpected view of the mountainsides by the Dead Sea covered thickly with animals:

A trumpet sounds. The march of animals and the woman who is close to death. These [images] both overlap at some point and create a chain of mountains around the Dead Sea. . . . Do the animals feel an incredible love for the eternally dying woman? . . . The lady gathers up her skirt to respond to the incredible love.

Ohno 1989, 152, ellipses in original

Reading Ohno's text and rehearsal notes on this section, one notices how numerous images come into contact with one another.¹³ Because the weasel-like creatures living in fox holes get their nourishment from puddles and organic matter in the mountains, Ohno sees the mountain range as a mother's womb, which the animals slowly devour. He identifies with them as a creature himself that as an embryo grew through feeding off the placenta and in essence "ate the life of the mother" (Ohno 1989, 167). He again compares the mountain and the mother with the slowly dying woman because both offer themselves as room and board. He appropriated the image of the dying woman from a poster of a theatre company that he saw during the festival at Nancy. It showed a woman dressed in white standing in the ocean surrounded by numerous children – for Ohno they correspond to the weasels – who the woman tries to save from drowning with outstretched arms.

Moreover, Ohno connects the woman with the image of a "dead angel," named after a copper sculpture that stands in front of a doll museum in Monte Carlo. He also calls a little doll inside the museum "dead angel" because it was carelessly left on the edge of a vitrine, apparently for lack of space. This comparison was inspired by a text in Hotta Yoshie's three volume work *Goya* (1976), in which the author describes his fascination with an insignificant painting at the Pushkin Museum in Moscow that neither hung at an advantageous spot nor was it mentioned in the catalog. He characterized the painting as one that "lay dying, as long as it has existed" ("Ankoku butō" 1983, 18). Ohno also saw a "dead angel" in an elderly Russian exile he encountered in New York; her white clothing, head covering, and bouquet of flowers stirred in him the association of the "ghost of La Argentina" (Ohno 1989, 166).

. . .

[The ghost motif returns in the "Viennese Waltz" scene from *The Dead Sea*.] In his text with the same title, Ohno again mentions the image of the woman in white who stands in the ocean (Ohno 1989, 160). Moreover, he notes of this section, which was performed to the waltz *Künstlerleben* ("Artist's Life") by Johann Strauss:

I imagine a scene in which a flock of ghosts pours out of an abandoned castle as if in competition with the flowers. When I danced this waltz in Europe, it was like strange ghosts of the dead stared at me, it was a feeling as if beauty and splendor suddenly blossomed in the midst of misery.

Ohno 1989, 169

The ghost motif comes from the stories by Lafcadio Hearn that Ohno repeatedly heard as a child. Ohno recalls that he was afraid of looking at his mother as she told the stories because in his imagination her body and those of the ghosts overlapped. At the same time, he associates a sense of security with this memory, when he nestled against his mother in a combination of fear and anticipation (Ohno 1989, 164). . . . On top of that, and calling to mind his vision of a general prompted by the postcard depicting the crater lake Shikotsu-ko, he sees a “death ghost” of an aborted fetus fathered by a general, whom he again identifies with his own father.

The various ghosts in “Viennese Waltz” reflect Ohno’s idea of the unity of life and death in that the menacing ghosts of Lafcadio Hearn’s stories or the ghosts of the dead are directly identified with the intimacy of his parents. With the image of the abandoned – and therefore falling into ruin – castle from which the ghosts well up like flowers, Ohno emphasizes his theme of creation out of destruction. In particular, the aesthetic comparison of ghosts with the beauty of flowers implies a light atmosphere, which is reflected in Ohno’s facial expression and movement dynamic.

. . .

While Hijikata looks for the common denominator of overlapping images in characteristic movement, form, or surface structure, Ohno identifies multiple things with one another when he recognizes a unity of life and death in their appearance or function. Whether he speaks about a broken car that runs again after being completely rebuilt, of the bare and yet ideal living environment that the mountains by the Dead Sea provide, of the doll that is attractive for the very fact of being superfluous, or of La Argentina’s ghost, he always uses them as metaphors for the creative process that only becomes possible through the act of (self-)destruction.

From the unity of the opposites, creation and destruction, Ohno further derives the unity of contrasting emotions like happiness and sadness, hope and despair, etc. And just like the aforementioned multiplication of images, this leads again to a minimization of expression. Although Ohno neither freezes his facial expression like a mask by keeping the muscles perfectly still, nor contorts his features into a grotesque expression, one is not often able to interpret his mien as a specific emotion.

The mobilization of the body solely through emotions and not through formal guidelines according to specific criteria, and the renunciation of technical dance training, have the effect that movements are dependent on personal habits and that one’s flexibility or bodily control is not significantly improved [by Ohno’s practices]. Thus, the basic posture is for the most part an erect unconscious everyday bearing, whereby the knees are not completely straightened and the upper body is not completely upright. In this pose, Ohno can initiate any movement while expending relatively little energy. Moreover, the lack of concrete rules for parts of the body in regard to dimension, sequence, or frequency – which could otherwise enforce symmetry – leads to a preference (in Ohno) for the right side that is prevalent except, for example, in the dance “The Time of Creation.” As a general rule, the right side is particularly emphasized in that Ohno initiates movement of the right arm by lifting his shoulder and turning his head to the right. Head and shoulder tend to remain in this position for a long period of time.

. . .

Basic motor patterns

The functional use of body parts points to the unity of idea and action. The main focus is primarily on the coordinated initiation of the movement of head and hands. In other words, the orientation of head and hands is largely comparable; in some cases, the torso follows suit by bending forward or turning at the waist. Even changes of location on stage or pose are for the most part initiated by the movement of head and hands in the respective direction.

The hands mostly move in the diagonal planes (*Zwischenflächen*) just in front of the body, where they may cross the middle of the body or each other.¹⁴ They often touch or seize other body parts, the costume, or props, whereby at times they may be taken behind the body.¹⁵ The hands remain weighted in sitting, kneeling, and reclined positions. This speaks to a functional use of the hands just like in everyday life. Wrists and elbows almost always stay bent so that they spatially direct the movement, and so that the arms get turned for arch-like movements. In between larger arm gestures, sometimes it is only the wrists and fingers that move.

Although Ohno does not have a fixed movement vocabulary, he consistently employs similar poses. Generally, whenever the hands are on the level of the lower face, or when they are extended at a distance from the body at least at shoulder height, the fingers are almost straight and the palms tend to be facing front or up. If they move below the shoulders or closer to the body, the palms face down or towards the body. Then all the fingers, or only the middle finger, are bent inward, or thumb and index finger make a circle. Just like the hand gestures, the positions of the fingers are sometimes different for the right and left hand.

Locomotion is accomplished mostly with steps of various paces. Although the turning in and out of the legs is mentioned only once in the description for “Viennese Waltz,” similar to the arm gestures, this can be frequently observed during sideways motion, as can a grapevine step. Despite changes of direction during a grapevine, the orientation of the torso can remain the same as the body twists at the waist. Alongside a vertical split of the body into a left and more strongly mobilized right side, the twist at the waist results in a similar split along the horizontal axis of the body into a lower and a more strongly mobilized upper body, with the occasional deviation from a frontal orientation. Gestures of the legs that are not accompanied by a change of location tend to be small steps or jumps in place, leg rotations in and out, and stomping of one leg after it circumscribes a wide arch to the front.

In most cases, the upper and lower body are initiated simultaneously and with similar dynamics. A stomp is accompanied by powerful, uncontrolled arm movements, calmly executed steps occur with moderate gestures. Even when the emphasis is clearly on head and hand movements, the gestures of the right arm, or with a change of pose or location, respective body sections that are not in use are not actively kept still, but contribute by shifting the weight through bending the knees, putting weight on the hands, or minimally counterbalancing with the left arm, etc. Delegation is subordinate to coordination.¹⁶ Ohno’s functionality is a fundamental difference from Hijikata’s more formal concept based on the idea of “fragmentation.”

The pause for Ohno is certainly another important phenomenon of delegation. Often the entire body holds still, sometimes one hand barely moves, or the upper body is kept still during locomotion. The active pause, which interrupts the well-paced flow of movement or goes against the direction of the movement of a different body part, requires a quick and controlled change of muscle tension. In more recent works, a general slowing of the pace and a tendency to maintain a constant tension is noticeable.

Besides delegation, the lack of a stronger movement control holds true for the spatial organization of hand and foot movement, locomotion, change of position and direction. As mentioned

in connection with articulation and the shift of the gravitational center, the use of diagonal planes (*Zwischenflächen*), respectively diagonals and arches, is dominant. Looking at the pathways of locomotion, Ohno only rarely covers a relatively great distance from the backstage wall towards the front edge of the stage in a straight line, nor does he consistently follow any other lines, either diagonal or parallel to the downstage edge. Mostly he moves along arched pathways that change direction, open circular lines, and short diagonals. The body's front thus changes its orientation on stage constantly: frontal or diagonal to the audience, during locomotion, and during changes of position even facing the back wall.

While Hijikata's audience watched closed lines of dancers and frequently looked at a frontal orientation over a long period of time, which resulted in them literally being con-front-ed with what happened on stage, Ohno's pathways that do not stick to a specific orientation allow a variety of perspectives. Hence, the audience is not directly subjected to the show on a physical level. Ohno's improvisations have more of an associative-emotional effect, which among other things contributes to the fact that Ohno's dance is easier to appreciate for a broader audience.

Notes

- 1 This chapter has been created from translated excerpts from Schwellinger 1998, specifically the chapters "Ōno Kazuo: Biographie" and "Ōno's Methoden der Bewegungsgestaltung."
- 2 For example, Konno Yuichi, in "Ankoku butō e no chinkonka," 76.
- 3 La Argentina, whose real name was Antonia Mercé, was born in Bueno Aires in 1890 and died in Bayonne, France in 1936. Trained in classical dance, she specialized in Spanish folk dances, which she stylized and refined. Through countless international tours, she was internationally known by the end of the 1920s. She was also enthusiastically celebrated in Tokyo, where she performed January 26–30, 1929.
- 4 Kreutzberg (1902–1968) performed in the Tokyo gekijō Theater April 26–30, 1934.
- 5 *Eds.*: In Schwellinger's full book, this footnote is cross-referenced with footnote 10 in the "Hijikata Tatsumi Biographie" chapter, in which she references the 1960 pamphlet "Naka no sozai/sozai," which was created for the *Hijikata Dance Experience no kai*. That pamphlet has since been translated into English: Hijikata, Tatsumi, "Inner Material/Material," trans. Nanako Kurihara, *TDR: The Drama Review* 44, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 36–42. Kurihara translates this as "drug dance."
- 6 Uesugi Mitsuyo quit a ballet company to train with Ohno after she saw him in a joint performance of the *shingeki* groups Bungakuza and Theater Echo (Teatoru ekō). She participated in Ohno's group pieces, and since 1975 has primarily worked as a soloist. Since her return from a three-year stay in France in 1990, she occasionally takes part in Ohno's workshops.
- 7 The "moss gully" links Lake Shikotsu-ko with the volcanic Mount Tarumae. Through the reference to the Swedish philosopher of nature and Theosophist Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772), Ohno refers to Shibusawa Tatsuhiko's "Cosmography of Dreams" (*Yume no uchū-shi*).
- 8 Ohno saw a recording of Mary Wigman's solo, *Hexentanz* from 1926; the episode with the concert piano occurred during rehearsals for *Admiring La Argentina* (Ohno 1989, 195, 209). For the episode with the piano and Ohno's movements see Schwellinger's full chapter, "Ōno's Methoden der Bewegungsgestaltung" (Ohno Kazuo: biography and methods of movement creation, 1998). Ohno saw dead people in the audience in 1986 during a performance in Buenos Aires ("Ohno Kazuo toshintai gengo" 1992, 24).
- 9 For the last example Ohno added the term *kankotsu dattai* (literally: to exchange bones and to steal the uterus) to the literature. Originally, it meant a takeover in a positive sense, i.e., to use a poem from past time as a model and write a new poem based on the old one but with its own value.
- 10 Konno Yuichi, in "Ankoku butō e no chinkonka."
- 11 See, for example, European reviews of the performance in Hasegawa 1980, 24–25.
- 12 Another comment suggests that this was not always correct (Ohno 1989, 65).
- 13 See Ohno (1989, 40, 44, 50ff., 145–173).
- 14 *Eds.*: In this chapter Schwellinger is influenced by "Inventarisierung von Bewegung" ("inventory of movement"), a method of movement analysis developed by Claudia Jeschke in cooperation with Cary Rick. "Zwischenflächen" in this method are the planes of motion which are neither the sagittal nor the frontal nor the transverse plane. For more on this see Schwellinger, "Zur Methode der

Bewegungsanalyse: Inventarisierung von Bewegung,” in *Die Entstehung des Butoh: Voraussetzungen und Techniken der Bewegungsgestaltung bei Hijikata Tatumi und Ōno Kazuo* (München: Iudicium Verlag, 1998), 17–21.

- 15 A typical example is his handling of the o-zen table and the cord that Ohno uses as a symbol of the womb. In this scene he often winds the cord around the table and/or himself, strikes the ground with it, pulls the table behind him, etc. (See, for example, the video *Aru byōin no episodio* and in *Ka-chō-fū-getsu*, video *Zen'ei buyō no sekai*.) The paper flowers mentioned in the Biography chapter were mostly held overhead, or held at an angle in front of the body as if an extension of the arms.
- 16 *Eds.*: “Delegation” and “Koordination” are also terms from “Inventarisierung von Bewegung.” “Delegation” means the succession of moving or pausing of body parts, and if a body part is initiating a movement, following the movement of another body part or keeping it actively still. “Coordination” refers to the movement of the joints like bending, stretching, turning, etc., and the movement of the extremities towards and away from the body (communication from the author, August 17, 2017). For more on this see Schwellinger, “Zur Methode der Bewegungsanalyse: Inventarisierung von Bewegung,” in *Die Entstehung des Butoh: Voraussetzungen und Techniken der Bewegungsgestaltung bei Hijikata Tatumi und Ōno Kazuo* (München: Iudicium Verlag, 1998), 17–21.

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