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# Butoh's Remediation and the Anarchic Transforming Politics of the Body in the 1960s

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# 17

# BUTOH'S REMEDIATION AND THE ANARCHIC TRANSFORMING POLITICS OF THE BODY IN THE 1960s

*Peter Eckersall*

"Human beings desire transformation" (The Play 2012, 202). The desire for transformation and the many ways one might understand this was expressed in numerous artistic and political outpourings in 1960s Japan. Following on from a rapidly transforming society in the early postwar era, one that saw the wholesale reconstruction and reinvention of urban space, and changes in community and national sentiment, the very idea of transformation was an enduring postwar narrative and a defining feature of life in the 1950s and 1960s. Although unresolved trauma and political adventurism was deeply embedded in all facets of the postwar era, transformation was measured, not by elegiac comparisons to the wartime past, but by a sense of complexity, innovation, growing consumerism, and intermedia practices that in many instances were felt as bodily experiences.

## Butoh and anti-art

What the art historian Kuroda Raijee calls the "anarchy of the body" as a condition of the 1960s saw many artists adopt bodily tactics in their work as a sign of "direct action" (*chokusetsu kōdō*). Much of this work is associated with the "anti-art" (*han geijustu*) movement that began in the annual Yomiuri Independent Exhibitions (*Yomiuri Indépendant* or *Anpan*) running in Tokyo from 1949 until 1964, when the exhibition series was discontinued. In late the 1950s and early 1960s this exhibition often featured works that moved from the visual to the performative and showed interest in embodied practices in order to transform the surrounding environment. The term *han geijutsu* was coined by the critic Tōno Yoshiaki to describe a trend of purging the optimistic progressivism and aestheticism of the art of the 1950s. It was originally applied to work of the artist Kudō Tetsumi who exhibited at the Twelfth Yomiuri Independent Exhibition in 1960. Groups making anti-art performances from the early-to-mid 1960s include Kyūshū-ha, Neo Dada, Group Ongaku, High Red Centre, and Zero Jigen. *Han geijutsu* performances tried to negotiate an implicit boundary separating art and life and breach it with bodily acts. Such art rejected all forms of authority, including the modern gallery system. In an implied encounter with the viewer, many *han geijutsu* works stressed participation in a wider discourse of art that connected objects to a sensory experience: art running into the streets, interrupting daily life, and provoking performative responses (Eckersall 2013, 16–20).

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Kuroda writes: "While the methodology and aesthetics of the creators differed greatly it can be stated that there were practically speaking no anti-art performances that did not include the concept of anarchy" (Kuroda 2010, 527). His conception of anarchy is one that provokes a form of collective bodily disorder that accords with the idea of transformation: anarchy of the body "vivified corners of urban spaces, and having abandoned the extant leftist ideologies and organizations [artists] formed their own groups [to] carry out 'direct actions' . . . *han geijutsu* was an avant-garde movement targeted towards 'society' going beyond the realm of 'art'" (Kuroda 2010, 523–524). There is an attempt to reorder the perceptible experience of reality in its reawakening of the sensory essence of the body as a site of transformation in personal, political, and aesthetic terms, all bound together by action.

Neo Dada Organizers – a group of artists who staged disruptive and playful actions in small studios and on the streets of Tokyo (1960–1963) – were an important example of this idea. Instigated by Yoshimura Masunobu, Neo Dada members included Akasegawa Genpei, Shinohara Ushio, and Arakawa Shusaku, all of whom were major artistic figures in the 1960s whose work spanned activities in Japan and the United States. "Suspended between art and guerrilla warfare" (Chong et al., 2012, 124), their performances included wrapping their naked bodies with handbills advertising their exhibition while walking through the streets of Ginza. Yoshimura and Shinohara often included violent actions such as cutting the surfaces of their artworks and smashing objects as a process of their art. Shinohara made 'boxing paintings' where he punched walls and canvases while wearing boxing gloves dipped in *sumi* ink. In these ways, the idea of action (*akushon*) was developed in their work. As the art historian William Marotti argues, *akushon* was an idea linking artistic practices with wider concerns: "the practice of '*akushon*' . . . came to encompass experiments investigating the very notion of artistic practice as a general category of action." Marotti shows how this art began to look "beyond the 'art' institutional frame to a general consideration of the possibilities of action – and even direct action" in a reference to the political sphere (Marotti 2006, 611–612).

In fact, many artists in the period were involved in performance practices that extended beyond or blew away the authority of artistic institutions. Ritual performances (called *gishiki*) by Zero Jigen (Zero Dimension), for example, were often staged to arouse a sense of confrontation with the everyday public. Similar to art happenings, their strange half naked processional walks were a rejection of Japanese order and conformity. Founded by Katō Yoshihiro and Iwata Shin'ichi in Nagoya in 1960, Zero Jigen's performances were bizarre and unruly:

> Venues for their 'rituals' included not only downtown streets but the Yamanote line train and Tokyo tram carriages, public baths, river beds, cemeteries, shrines, May Day meeting places, popular theatre, *angura* theatre and strip clubs, and the performers truly began to take on the air of third-rate actors.
>
> *Kuroda 2006*

Another example is Hi Red Centre's famous *Street Cleaning Event* (1964), staged as a parody of a Japanese government directive for people to present a clean image of the city in preparation for the 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games. Looking like hygiene scientists or engineers in white lab coats and carrying cleaning brushes and buckets, Hi Red Centre's founders Akasegawa Genpei, Nakanishi Natsuyuki, and Takamatsu Jirō were joined by collaborators as they carefully washed the footpaths of Tokyo and cleaned the cracks between the pavements. A nearby sign read: "Cleaning Event. Be Clean! Campaign to Promote Cleanliness and Order in the Metropolitan Area." Unlike Zero Jigen's standout unruly performances, the intention of the *Street Cleaning Event* is to make daily life and art indistinguishable from the each other. Although, using humor

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and surprise, Hi Red Centre's work had a serious aspect that what about exposing the gestures and performative posturing of institutions. Their art and performance works copied and enlarged mainstream institutional images and practices as a way of exploding the authority of these institutions and their targets included government, universities, and the judiciary.

Butoh's emergence in 1959 as a politics of embodiment and an activity that was at least in part drawing on ideas of spontaneity, action, parody, eroticism, and confrontation was an essential aspect of this desire for transformation and on the edges of the *han geijutsu*, Neo Dada and 'Happenings' performance crowd. Looking back, we can now see that butoh's emergence was shaped in and by the interdisciplinary and corporeal, expressly action fixated environment in the arts.

Thus, this contribution aims not to revalidate butoh as a preeminent challenge to modern and contemporary dance (although butoh certainly was that), instead it hopes to briefly situate butoh in an intermedial context that offered political perspectives on the question of the body and the desire for transformation. We can now see that butoh's importance was not only as a transgressive innovation in dance but also one that mutually benefited from its connections to visual arts, film, music, poster art, and new media.

## Bodies and counterculture politics

Butoh is also connected to prevailing discourses of the body that evolved in 1960s radical politics and the student movement. The dramatic incursions and corporeality of mass demonstrations and the focus on sensation and experience that was shared among radical student protestor groups was the basis for what Suga Hidemi, a former activist and specialist of ideological perspectives on the 1960s, sees as a dynamic corporeal vision of culture (*bunka ni taisuru doutai shiryoku*) that would break Japan out of the strictures of its leftist postwar orthodoxy (Suga 2005, 3–8). In June 1960, a mass of bodies occupied the streets around the Japanese parliament building (*Diet*) to protest the resigning of the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between the United States and Japan (shortened in Japanese to *Anpo Jōyaku*, or AMPO). Although the demonstrations failed to prevent the treaty's renewal and the protesters eventually dispersed, the incident left many with bitter feelings of betrayal and the fragmentation of leftist political groups that followed saw the development of a plethora of new left forces and directions of activity. These groups were not unified by a central party organization or adherence to orthodox Marxism, rather, the students in the new left often saw themselves as guerrilla activists who trained their bodies and minds to violently overthrow the Japanese state. To draw on Suga's work again, the culmination of street protests, university occupations, and group actions that were a common feature of life in Japan in 1968 and 1969, while often addressing local issues and concerns also needs to be understood as a part of an international revolution of radical politics centered on the body (Suga 2003, 6). For example, new modalities of protest with their rhetorics of purifying violence and acts of bodily confrontation were seen at the core of new left movements in Europe, the Americas, China, and South-East Asia as well as Japan. While local contexts and motivations differed, they all shared a common goal of politics expressed through the body.

In Japan we can see evidence of this in documentary films of student protests that were becoming increasingly violent in the late 1960s. Using newly developed portable film cameras documentary filmmakers covering the protests sometimes adopted subjective and immersive critical perspectives in their work or blended fiction and realty as in the work of Ōshima Nagisa, whose *Diary of a Shinjuku Thief* (*Shinjuku Dorobo Nikki*, 1969) staring underground theatre artist Kara Jūrō, freely mixed fictional scenes that were filmed in the midst of real

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street demonstrations. Ōuchida Keiya's *Chikatetsu Hiroba* (*Underground Plaza*, 1970) followed 'folk guerrillas' gathered at the underground plaza linking the west and east exits of the Shinjuku railway station in February 1969. While the demonstrations attracted thousands of people, what is remarkable about the film is the way that Ōuchida (who also filmed butoh performances) tries to always film from inside the action. Using dramatic swirling camera moves and montage-style editing, the film attempts to communicate a sense of the visceral nature of the protest and impart an embodied experience of its corporality to the spectator (Eckersall 2013, 81–105).

## Butoh against alienation

Although Hijikata Tatsumi and the butoh artists of the 1960s generally did not have direct connections to the protest movement, some of Hijikata's writing on butoh during that time is expressly Marxist in tone and shows us how the focus on activating bodily presence and sensation was also seen as a political gesture. In his essay, "To Prison" (*Keimusho e*), Hijikata notes that butoh is a site for the rehabilitation of the alienated human condition: "I am a body shop; my profession is the business of human rehabilitation, which goes today by the name of dancer." His dance, as he sees it at the time, is "a naïve battle with nature" and a protest against the "alienation of labor" in capitalist society (Hijikata 2000, 44–45). Action and movement as a direct force of resistance to capitalism as expressed here in relation to butoh also equates with the way that protest actions were not only about making politics visible but aimed to trigger feelings and emotions and collective forms of embodied resistance to the state (Eckersall 2013, 100–102). As Yoshikuni Igarashi writes: "By taking the beatings of police batons on their heads and being sprayed with tear gas, rally participants presented themselves both as victims of the state's repressive powers and as agents for the resistance against it" (Igarashi 2007, 123).

Hijikata was photographed in close proximity to a late sixties protest rally by the photographer Fukase Masahisa. Along with other art photographers such as Hosoe Eikoh and Moriyama Daidō, Fukase copiously documented the 1960s in terms that highlighted bodies in action, erotic nudes and everyday people in the changing landscapes of postwar Japan. In this particular image, Hijikata is shown walking against a stream of young riot police in their protective gear and helmets and carrying batons. Hijikata is wearing typical butoh garb of a torn red kimono, knee-high white stockings, disheveled hair, and, oddly, carrying a watermelon in a string bag. The police are not in riot formation but seem to be either walking to, or away from, a street action. They look at Hijikata with suspicion and perhaps distaste. Meanwhile, the artist himself looks directly forward, avoiding the gaze of the police. The image is uncanny and open to multiple interpretations. Stephen Barber reads the image in the context of Jean Genet's visit to Japan in 1969 and Genet's taunting of the riot police at a Tokyo demonstration. Genet was a well-known source of inspiration for Hijikata's attempts to deform the body and play with notions of criminality, sexuality, and gender ambiguity. And while Genet throws himself into the danger of the demonstrations, Barber is not impressed by Hijikata's own departure from the scene, suggesting that the photograph depicts Hijikata "swallowed-up in his own insular concerns" (Barber 2006, 63). However, looking at the bodies in the image also suggests a different reality – the contrast of two embodied states; one being the youthful and anxious looking riot police and the other the unruly and defiant figure of Hijikata. Their difference shows how the intersections of politics and art are embodied: "In a moment of passing, a critical space between two experiences of humanity is opened, and two versions of history and two events become visible and intersect" (Eckersall 2013, 7).

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## Remediation into image

Of course, butoh is an expressive medium that has long attracted photographers who sometimes collaborated with particular performers and groups. As a result of this, an important part of butoh has always been its remediation into image. Well known is the fact that Hijikata worked with Hosoe Eikoh on the *Kamaitachi* series of photographs that was first released as a limited edition book in 1969 and is now a seminal example of butoh photography. With Hijikata leaping through the air in rice fields in the backwater landscapes of Akita and pulling faces for laughing peasants, he revives the spirit of the 'sickle tooth weasel,' something that is both playful and strange. These images project the idea of butoh into a rural phantasm-like landscape, a fiction of a premodern body connected to the earth and the changing seasons. Hosoe also photographed images of Hijikata's company in urban settings. His arrangements of half-naked bodies standing in lines with hoods on their heads that he set off balance in the composition or his close-up images of parts of the body in high-contrast – three arms reach into a prone back in one of the most celebrated images – almost abstract black and white, grainy prints that convey the transgression and animal physicality of butoh. From these photographs, we can appreciate much of the radical proposition for the body that Hijikata imagined. These photographs and poster art by Tadanori Yokoo and others are emblematic of butoh's transgressive nature. They acted not only as a form of advertisement for coming performances or documentation. Much more important is how these images made by artists who were friends and collaborators of Hijikata stand as an extension of the spirit of butoh carried into other media.

Remediation is a concept that describes how art works can "put the viewer in the same space as the objects viewed" and is a helpful way of thinking about how this extension of butoh into visual arts also takes us back to the body (Bolter and Grusin 2000, 11). A term associated with the new media theorists Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin to describe how one might experience immersion in media, remediation can also apply to the corporeal experience of bodies in artistic and political actions in the 1960s. Remediation in the new media sphere finds an effective precursor in the butoh 'cine dance' (*shine dansu*) works by experimental filmmaker Iimura Takahiko. In these early 1960s films of Hijikata's performances of *The Masseur* (*Anma*, 1963) and *Rose Colored Dance* (*Bara Iro Dansu*, 1965), Iimura wanted to make the audience experience the sensation of butoh as a form of visual poetry inspired by Japanese Dada poets (see Eckersall 2013, 45). Using a wind-up super-8 camera that had limited filming time, Iimura created impressionistic and anarchic sequences that captured the flights of movement of the dancers in blurry, extended, and fragmented arrangements.

The films, like the photographs, above, are remediations of the embodied experience into image. The difference here is that this is a moving image that captures scenes from the dance and then extends it into abstract sequences of blurring bodies, flaying clothes, and distended surfaces. For Iimura, "'the body is one kind of media' amidst the filmic reconstitution of the dance" (in Eckersall 2013, 55). It is also a way of extending the dance itself and taking butoh outside of a fixed temporal expression, one that is limited to the time and immediacy of its performance. In this way, Iimura's films are a clear example of a medium that is between film and dance – neither one nor the other but combining aspects of both around the sensation of embodied action, something very close in mind to the idea of *chokusetsu kōdō*-direct action. Their subjectivity puts the viewer in the middle of the performance, once again as a demonstration of the way that embodied practices in the 1960s aimed to constantly shift the perspective of the viewer. By making them participant and taking the performer outside of themselves a new kind of radical subjectivity (*shutaisei*) situated in and through the body was born.

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## Hijikata at Expo 70

Richly dark and expressive images of butoh performers were captured in films and photographs throughout the 1960s by filmmakers and photographers such as William Klein, Donald Richie, Hosoe Eikoh, and Iimura Takahiko. Ironically, however, butoh's trajectory of remediation, and in a strange way, its coming together with the remnants of anti-art, are seen in the conflation of avant-garde arts and public spectacle that was the monumental event of Osaka Expo 70 (*Banpaku*). Running from March to September 1970 and with attendances of 64 million people, it is estimated that around half the population of Japan attended the Expo World Fair. The Expo theme of "Progress and Harmony for Humankind" shows Japan at its most utopic moment in modern history, with high economic growth, full employment, and amazing technologies and arts that were a primary feature of *Banpaku*. The artistic program of Expo was curated by the sculptor and visual artist Okamoto Tarō, and many *han geijutsu* artists and groups contributed ideas, art works, and performances. (Those who did not were often members of a loose group of artists and activists who staged events and performances under the name of *Hanpaku* – "Against Expo"). Among the many science-fiction and Metabolist inspired pavilions at Expo was the *Astrorama Midori Kan*, a multi-colored, stickle patterned geodesic dome containing an immersive cinema sound and projection system that was said to be the most advanced of its day.

Although like many artists, Hijikata was critical of the popularization and commercialization of Expo and was quoted as saying that Expo was the enemy of underground arts (in Merewether and Hiro 2007, 28), he also featured in one of the films made for projection in the Midori Kan, a work called *The Birth*. Shot with a five-lens 70 mm camera that captured a greatly enhanced "fish-eye" in-the-round perspective, Hijikata appears as a wild shaman dancing in the mist of the volcanic smoke of Mount Iō and in erotic scenes shot with his butoh company at his Asbestos-kan studio in Tokyo. Stephen Barber has written widely about butoh on film and writes that *The Birth* had an "incoherent scenario" written by the poet Tanikawa Shuntaro. Hijikata's appearance as a "monstrous and grotesque" figure was especially requested by Tanikawa. Barber notes that

> other sequences displayed primal natural landscapes, and fragments of cities, about to be destroyed. A further sequence . . . showed Hijikata's Asbestos Hall dancers, filmed from above, naked and apparently engaged in sexual acts, the images superimposed with images of hell from paintings by Bosch and others.
>
> *Barber 2012, 2*

The film was what Barber calls "part-miracle, part-malediction . . . sensorially engulfing" (ibid).

*Banpaku* was a watershed moment for the arts and the anti-Expo people were right in their critique of its appropriation and containment of radical artistic ideals. To be an anarchic body immersed in the sensation of intermedial experience meant something different after Expo. The desire for transformation was everywhere but no longer directed to radical ends. By watching the film of Hijikata in the Astrorama, everyone could experience his performance, but doing so, they would no longer be called to action.

A question that follows then is how would butoh develop in a social context that was becoming less defined by the example of bodies resisting the status quo and where the tactic of immersion was seen as mass spectacle rather than an avant-garde sensibility and dramaturgy of the counterculture? Also where talk of alienation (Tanaka Min is perhaps the exception) largely leaves the discourse of butoh to be replaced by nativist Tōhoku Kabuki references and practices

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tending towards an apolitical trance-like sublime on the one hand and outrageous Dionysian erotic displays on the other. Arguably, by the end of the 1960s, the active disturbance of butoh was substantially reduced as it became much more widely known.

## Coda – Gekidan Kaitaisha and the politics of *shintai*

After the 1960s the wait for a new awareness of embodied performance took some time and we needed a new vocabulary and politics of the body to emerge. In the 1990s the work of Gekidan Kaitaisha (Theatre of Deconstruction) revived the idea of a transforming body as a site of political action. Kaitaisha draws some of its influences from butoh and Hino Hiruko who is one the group's leading members traces her own training back to Hijikata's workshops. Her guidance in the training and choreography of Kaitaisha makes an explicit link between the style of *ankoku butoh* developed by Hijikata and the training and performances practices seen in Kaitaisha's work. Under the direction of Shimizu Shinjin, Kaitaisha have also explored the politics of deconstruction and connected this with an idea of the body being able to confront society in ways that are close to Hijikata's early thinking about butoh as a way of reinvigorating sensation and resisting alienation.

Kaitaisha's works in the late 1990s and early 2000s often included filmed images of war projected over the stage in ways that sometimes made the bodies of the performers invisible. The series of works *Bye Bye: Phantom* (2003–2006) were some of the most extreme of these as they featured a massive projection of footage showing a US bombing run on a local target in Afghanistan during the misnamed "War on Terror" started by George W Bush after the attacks of 9/11. The images showed a pilot's view of the ground as seen from the cockpit of his plane; the film was reportedly sourced from peace activists, and it was assumed that the footage was not normally available for public view. It showed the plane's arrival at the target and the weapons being released followed by an image of white light "flaming out" as the target was destroyed. We could hear the pilot excitedly reporting over his radio that the unseen enemy combatants were "toast." Shimizu placed these bodies in a space of vulnerability and annihilation in order to have them bio-politically recognize their precarious state and then haplessly and energetically fight back. Adam Broinowski, who was a member of Kaitaisha during that time, suggests that Shimizu used the combination of war images and bodies to rethink the dominating power of neoliberalism. He compares Shimizu's dramaturgy of showing "marginalized bodies surviving in the globalized media operation" with Hijikata's concern "with the colonial peripheries of Empire as a 'corpse being stood up' (by earth, atmosphere, elements, energy, memory)" (Broinowski 2016, 150–151). Clearly Kaitaisha's use of media and their tactics of immersion are an entirely different register to the intermedial experiences of the 1960s. Kaitaisha's work is about contemporary media as an extension of biopower and their work is broadly didactic. The bodies fight for survival in a situation of war that no longer has bodies on the ground directly confronting each other. Artists working in the high technology and mediatized conditions of the 21st century – and by dint of the visceral nature of the performance also the spectators of this work – are no longer able to participate vicariously, as an extension of the camera's abstract mobility, as in the example of cine dance. To do so would be voyeuristic and to condone disembodied violence. Here the objectification of the body in relation to the bombing technology is seen as a precursor to the drone.

Shimizu talks about how *shintai*, as a Japanese word for the culturally conditioned body, replaced the rebellious primal image of the body as flesh or *nikutai* in butoh performances in the 1960s. *Nikutai* was used by Hijikata to describe the raw state of the body in *ankoku butoh* (see Centonze 2010, 114–118). *Shintai* (bodies) by contrast, according to Shimizu, show us how "various permutations of this opposition between something 'becoming' and something 'constructing'

could be reconciled" (Shimizu 2010, 21). Sympathy for Deleuze and Guattari's attempt to connect the material aspect of embodiment with revolutionary ideas is evident in these comments. The body in the work of Kaitaisha has material dimensions; it is not representational and each person "speaks" with or through the agency of their performance. The physical acts that are often difficult and demanding high levels of fitness are real, and the bodies of the performers get tired. This is an example of what Noda Manabu calls the postwar Japanese body "ill at ease" (2007, 272). But is it also an example of how the politics of butoh have changed, and if we are to consider butoh on its political terms, then the formation of butoh as an incarnate "rebellion of the flesh" needs to be updated to include an awareness of these political bodies. In contemporary society, everything is subjected to immersion and experience is no longer connected to resistance. The potential in Kaitaisha's work is for the performed actions of the body to show a political practice that revives the energy of resistance. Because of this, I think of Kaitaisha as one of the most important legacies of butoh and one that shows us an important characteristic of butoh as a politics of the body as it needs to be for our time.

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