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## **The Routledge Companion to Butoh Performance**

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## **The Book of Butoh; The Book of the Dead**

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# THE BOOK OF BUTOH; THE BOOK OF THE DEAD

*Uno Kuniichi (translated by Bruce Baird)*

“Whatever you do, you cannot say anything that will help you understand that you are you.”  
– *Ailing Terpsichore (HTZ 1: 61)*

The dancer Hijikata has left behind marvelous book which is unlike any other book in the world. *Ailing Terpsichore* is, more than a book, an event itself. It is almost as if we should ask what is written there and in what kind of language. *Ailing Terpsichore* is not dance theory, nor the biography of a dancer, nor the script of a dance, but rather rejects all such limits, and is simultaneously theory, biography, poetry, narrative, and script. It is not the case that it is a comprehensive book created by a means of integrating a lot of elements. Through infinite differentiation of the ordinary but severe ecology and climate (of a village) that swirls around a child's body, the result is an expensive butoh book that knows no bounds.

This book endlessly records the innumerable images and incidents that pass through the body of a child. Not as memoir. The time born from the narration dissolves the past and present.

The immediate future is imperiled; I was surrounded by something that resembled the atmosphere of fluttering butterfly wings. Even the vapor that surrounded me (that was like I was silently watching a small snake melt) approached the hermetically sealed space along with the butterfly. For the shape of such an I, there is no childhood and no past. There is not even anything like something one would have no choice but to invent.

*HTZ 1: 73*

The body and time that are dissolved into a world which is endlessly differentiated, are in that instant scooped up by the written words, and immediately returned to chaos. In this way, this book becomes part of the crowded universe of Hijikata's butoh; it becomes a map. And an apparatus.

*Ailing Terpsichore* is the kind book that you cannot read unless you find a way to read it while reading it over and over again. It is not that it has difficult circumlocutions or words whose meaning one doesn't understand or that it is full of hidden riddles. However, it excludes all the ceremonial processes we rely on when we read a book, the personalities and points of view that establish the narrative, the redundancy, the allotment of significance, the explanation of situations

which serve to establish the descriptions of temporal and spatial coordinator axes, the speed of events, the stability of relative perception, the psychological units. All are excluded. We do not see any economizing concepts that might accompany the transmission of something. This has nothing to do with the finesse of expression nor with devices or schemes of literary style. Each sentence seems to have the density of poetry. But it is not written as the prose poem, through great leaps and condensed metaphors predicated on the “authority” of poetic language. *Ailing Terpsichore* was through and through written as prose to record events faithfully. Certainly, this prose poem is so fast as to be difficult to read without the presumption of the density and speed of poetry. However, the language continues to record from start to finish while always moving as minute particles of sensation. Metaphor is as rare as possible. It is not permitted [for the reader] to linger on any character, word, or rhythm. There is something in the speed and directionality of the narrative that keeps the reader at bay. The book shifts focus in dizzying ways, as if it is only a bundle of directionality and speed. It seems as though transmission, explanation, and even the fact of being a work are not at issue. A determination to record like the wind runs through this book. Language has become like the line of the wind, or the continual flashing of light, or the music of feelings. And we can only wonder at the fact that it is taken to its logical conclusion without any compromise.

Hijikata read French poets with his own sense of smell, and had an extraordinary interest in and understanding of surrealism, but *Ailing Terpsichore*, which might look like it is full of the surreal, does not look like *depayement*, or collage, or *automatic ecriture*. This book clearly records as traces of indestructible movement a fundamentally different orientation from the desire to create a fountain of images similar to world of dreams while methodologically extracting and regulating the unconscious. There is not even one event that could become a static image, and turned into a work of art, and thus become the subject of contemplation.

The world visible to the “I” (who appears to be child in a Tohoku village) lacks all things that could become coordinates, such as a fixed center called “I,” relationships between specific people and that “I,” the topography which might serve as a staging ground for those relationships, even scenery, and even an era. Rather it is not that it “lacks” these, but that the language spurts out in excess and without pause, at a different level of perception than would even accept such coordinates. There is no “I,” and no “the body of I” (my body). “The body of I” has dispersed in all directions like a thread and transformed into formless divisionless space. *Ailing Terpsichore* is not even a hymn to the body, it is proof of the absence of the body. This is because, to the extent that the body extinguishes form, the lifeform is intimately pierced and replenished by flows, feelings, shadows, and different things.

I am beset by the feeling that I am already being caused to dance by something. I became like matter which has suddenly lost its life, possibly because I was enveloped in steam. Probably, the condition of my body itself not feeling gravity also taught me the gesture of rapidly eating the forms which suddenly floated into my thoughts. It appeared that any crevice where affection and discernment might enter my conduct completely disappeared. I guess I even forgot my hands and feet and even my body itself, as if the body was not my own thing to possess.

HTZ 1: 15

The “body” is always being encroached on by something else and losing its contours. It is pierced by and eaten by rays of light, steam, shadows, sugar, medicine, bugs, animals, smoke, ghosts, tatamis, sliding doors, sugar candy, dogs, and cats. And each of these things in turn exists being shined on and pierced by other things. The bodily sensation that the “body” can be grasped as one’s own thing disperses into the universe without “affection” or “discernment.”

I was only thinking about the way that this body will likely continue to be eaten away unless some unusual event does not immediately occur in the sky.

There were always one or two gods that would rip you to shreds no matter which house you went to, and no matter which house, there was always someone sitting there who couldn't suppress the violent passions of their soul, and they would scream in a shrill voice while gripping those nostalgic fire tongs. I guess I had the feeling that I could understand these people, who taste the all the particulars of being on the brink of cowardice, so I looked at them.

It is certain that the things which I quickly found out, when compared with this situation, were almost all damaged and not more than the corpses of forms. Because the roots of humanity had already crumbled away from the people around me, it could seem as if it was OK for me not to do any thinking.

*HTZ 1: 17*

Hints and fragments of the world, things, a mother, ghosts all capture the "I's body" in an intimate darkness. The original form of butoh spreads its roots within the darkness in which "the sniffing sound of snot faintly resembles the spirit." And within that original form an even deeper darkness suffers.

A feeble person who slept and woke over and over was always moaning in a dark corner of the house. You could say that I learned from the lessons of this feeble *terpsichore* my habit of turning loose my body on the *tatami* like a fish. It appeared that her body was made with the contours of doing something like desiring, but even so, it was captured by a darkness that was like something ruptured and ripened somewhere. She[/I] probably didn't remember the darkness on the other side that no one knows, this dark resurrection which is like a beginning.

*HTZ 1: 18*

The form of darkness that lies at the origins of Hijikata (who says he learned his dance observing sick people) was just such a darkness. Sickness is a horizon event, which interrupts the image. Sickness is certainly darkness. It is not accompanied by sensitivity, sorrow, or tragedy. The weight of the body with ailing organs, which lies down completely exhausted, melts into the organless darkness. The body with ailing organs escapes from those organs, and becomes a part of the vast thick darkness, and undulates. Accordingly, "the shadow directs the light to breathe." Undoubtedly, all people came from this darkness and live constantly soaking half their bodies in this darkness. It is only that our consciousness and our language and even our unconsciousness cannot successfully go down into that darkness.

That thing I can see is certainly a horse or a cow, but is it indeed a dark hole, or probably something that went into the hole and now I can't see it anymore?

*HTZ 1: 20*

It is possible that in the "dancing darkness" that Hijikata always saw, people only saw images or the theme *ankoku butoh* (dance of darkness). So, it is possible that Hijikata (who didn't set foot on stage for a long time) has surpassed *ankoku butō* and was secretly polishing a method for being loyal to the darkness. The world in which *Ailing Terpsichore* was written pours into the present without any mediation, and creeps into the future. Like warped yeast, it is a past which refuses direct time.

It is probably best to think that to this person who lived an extraordinary temporality, the ten plus years he “didn’t appear on stage” were lived in a way that is incomprehensible to our imagination.

In that universe, there was nothing like a confrontation between the “I” and the world, much less a harmony. There is no conflict between powers. It is just the soft cruel world spreading forth without end with everything permeating everything else, and substituting with everything else. It is not an “I,” but a tactile sense like the wind continuing to talk. He depicts fully, nimbly, and brutally, the chaotic sensations that whirled around his young body without mixing in any children’s stories. The open and continuous (to the point of absurd) receptivity exists as a strange density of all the various phenomena that visited his young body and as a disposition that links them all overcoming nearness and farness. He is not the kind of genius who struggles, triumphs, and then controls things. He is the kind of genius who has sensitivity to the particulates of the world created everywhere of commonplace things, and gets entangled with everything.

The[/His] body is certainly not settled into a fixed form and dimension. The body and perceptions of the young boy scatter in all directions and expand and contrast in the atmosphere. It is as if several bodies have been turned over and over, consumed, and released into the atmosphere.

The I which applied a charcoal fire mold to my shin always felt distressed towards my body as if I were being suspected of something. When I would step into this suspicious territory, I would embrace a strange space-time. It is likely that the I who was wearing the shell of chaos, wanted to be treated as the body that had thrown that off. The I (that stored up something like a marching band at his side and in his face in which his furrowed brow was connected directly to a gap in the sky) sometimes showed a nimble panic. When the sun would cloud over, his feelings would cloud over, and in just that way come to resemble his body. Like a frog with only half a body, I would press my back against a fence.

*HTZ 1: 33–34*

The young boy’s body extends all the way to the sky; it becomes chaos without distance or dimensions. In the same way, the young man inside Hijikata wrote *Ailing Terpsichore* in a chaotic space which is neither past, present nor future. The young man moves continually in a terrible chaos surround by the dead who routinely appear suddenly. It is not the case that the expression of gloom, the laid-bare sadness, the desires and rage of adults are liquidated into nature. It is just that they become countless mosaic pieces in the same whirlpool that have been dissolved on the same scale as nature. In that place, women and sick people always give off a certain strange thick scent. There is a heavy, gentle, stagnant, sluggish flow there. *Ailing Terpsichore* is a medium for just such a universe. Robust grim laboring men construct this chaotic universe around a certain powerful core. To the children of this universe (who don’t yet have their own bodies and who are spread out infinitely over the universe), the men feel like thick-headed pieces of wood. It is as if only the women and infirm live trembling as half fluid fragile bodies of deviation about to melt on the edge of the chaos, exposed in all their fragility.

Artaud said, “For the body, organs are useless.”

Man is sick because he is badly constructed.

We must decide to strip him in order to scratch out this animalcule which makes him itch to death,

god,  
and with god  
his organs.

For tie me down if you want to,  
but there is nothing more useless than an organ.  
When you have given him a body without organs,  
then you will have delivered him from all his automatisms and restored him to his  
true liberty.

*Artaud 1995*

From a completely different starting point, Hijikata knew the inescapable reality of the body without organs. It appears that his “body without organs” is a completely different one from Artaud’s. Or if we assume that Artaud (surrounded by a system and ideals which severely rejected the body, and within the agony of schizophrenia) could only rarely affirmatively realize the “body without organs,” then perhaps Hijikata thoroughly created a geography in which this body could live as if there was only this “body without organs.” It is because Hijikata shared such deep sympathy with Artaud, that sometimes he had to vomit out, “You know, after all, I am not Artaud.” It is not a matter which one of them was greater. It is because the “body without organs” does not have “organs” that it can pass through various states, and take on various shapes. This is not a discovery of only Artaud. Surrounded by a system which distanced the body, Artaud had no choice but to actualize the self-awareness of the “body without organs” in hasty destructive inclinations, and had to search for its models in the far-away places of Mexico, the empire of Heliogablaus, and the island of Bali. I have a feeling that for Hijikata the “body without organs” was a more direct concrete thing. It is for that reason that his version of the “body without organs” took on different aspects. Hijikata also lived an era of revolt, violence, and destruction. Because the “body without organs” is always and everywhere rejected, it has to don a mask, arm itself, and be slathered with negative will, and scream out. But in *Ailing Terpsichore*, one cannot help but think that there is no armament, no mask, no negation. The universe is differentiated into subtle differences and groups of movement, and has changed into a milky way in which there is no division of life and death. Certainly, generation is not clouded in some hazy myth, but lived as a concrete reality. In order for this book to always be witness to generation, it has to be difficult to read.

And by being a book which is through and through a book concerning generation, *Ailing Terpsichore* also becomes a book about death, a “Book of the Dead.” The dead are always appearing suddenly at any time and place in this book. This young boy who wants to come in contact with all things and wants to become all things, again and again mimics the dead.

I was certainly and clearly sucking up through my pores, a wind which was probably blowing on the skin of the dead. Who was it who was encouraging it [/me], “just a little bit more, just a little bit more,” and being cleansed by the transparent wind, and exposed to consolation? Is it because it is only the dead who can sleep contently when the light of a thunderbolt goes behind their eyes?

*HTZ 1: 84*

On account of the painful injection that came from that damp earth, even though I was full of lies, I became a body unable to lie. The things that are propped up all around that body, seemed as if they had completely died, leaving only the dark texture of me behind. Even after this thing called I dies, I guess the shape of me folding my arms over my chest will remain. Around me the voice(s) of rumors could be heard.

*HTZ 1:104*

Everyone disappeared from the house. Even the taciturn person suddenly disappeared who turned his/her shoes backwards and waved them. It is just submerged earthworms. I have a feeling that I saw a corpse person striding along with giant steps wearing the form of an unfamiliar clear stomach. I also have the feeling that I have seen a corpse in the shape of a long slender stomach tying off the slender stomach and somewhat regretfully disappearing.

HTZ 1:120

More than being a hymn to life, the “body without organs” is an infinitely intimate requiem for death. Hijikata’s hoarse voice (squeezed from his throat like bundle of thick darkness) still reverberates in my ears, from the time when he acted the voices of dead spirits who were visiting the village like the wind. The dead, the corpses of the dead, the gaze and voice emanating from the dead – these are all indispensable parts of the climate surrounding the young boy’s body like a whirlpool. The way of life in which the body is released from the organs necessarily has a strange relation to death. While passing through the variations of death again and again, one drives away the limitations of the body in the darkness or in the whirlpool. It is as if death is one of the forms of the “body without organs.” Just as Artaud’s “cruelty” and “theater,” Hijikata’s “darkness” and *butoh* [/dance] are some of the infinite variations of the body without organs.

And in the end, is there not one more thing that should surprise us: that all of these things are contained within a language? While being a particularly hard book to read, is not it the case that *Ailing Terpsichore* is after all constituted on the premise of a deep trust of the ecology of language? Of course, that language almost invariably rejects the stability and economy of significance. But it’s not that significance is directed toward the void and sucked up by it. Language is replenished by something which is neither thought nor analysis nor description. It is not nonsense, but trying to connect language to the whirlpool of events, without causing it to coagulate into meaning. Nevertheless, language is not at all the event itself, nor reality itself. Language is strictly separated from the world by a wall. Or rather language itself is that wall. In *Ailing Terpsichore*, this wall of language has become as thin as possible and as soft as possible, but we do not see the naiveté that on account of that thinness and softness it has been able to grasp the reality of life. On the contrary, this wall is confirmed as a thin excessively strong membrane. It is never forgotten that it is a written world. Language is oriented toward the darkness and to an almost unbearable turbulence. That turbulence swallows the individual specimens of death. And language itself possesses a peculiar power to wake up death. The power humans possess as language sometimes severs life, causes it to stagnate, and corrodes it away. If language is to repel death and preserve life in the face of the terrible turbulence, just how should we employ language for that purpose? We must draw near to larger turbulence, and merge the small turbulence inside the individual with the larger turbulence. But what should we do so that the two turbulences should not short circuit and explode? I think that *Ailing Terpsichore* is a book about life and death with a certain deep wisdom. Its language is inhuman, kind, wild, and as fast as the wind; it does not try to follow any creeds, aesthetics, or systems. There was once an author who played a role in Hijikata’s debut, who raised the topics of health, muscle, power, and even the Emperor, and armored himself with many layers of keenness and weakness, and finally, could not help but be atavistic through the ritual of seppuku.<sup>1</sup> Hijikata’s life was completely different from that author’s life. He did not need anything outside himself. Because he himself was completely outside. He did not need any circuitousness to compensate for his inside by clinging on to some sort of outside. For that reason, there was no reason to give the body any special privileges, or to idolize it. In *Ailing Terpsichore*, there are no weapons, no masks, and no armor. There is nothing fixed and nothing claimed. The world is detailed without end, just as it is, but it always escapes. And that which always prevents this movement from being extinguished is *language*.

### **Note**

- 1 Translator's note: Uno here refers to Mishima Yukio's suicide in front of the Japanese self-defense forces on November 25, 1970.

### **Translated from**

Uno, Kuniichi. 1986. "Butō no sho, shisha no sho." *Yūrika* no. 237 (18 July): 30–37.

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