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Butoh Performance



Edited by Bruce Baird and Rosemary Candelario

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Bruce Baird, Rosemary Candelario

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Bruce Baird, Rosemary Candelario

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LIGHT AS DUST, HARD AS STEEL, FLUID AS SNAKE SALIVA

The Butoh Body of Ashikawa Yoko

SU-EN

A body of infinity

Her presence is fierce, almost beyond human. Under her feet, the ground cracks open. We sense a heavy weight, yet also the speed of light. Limbs contrive the impossible. Her body challenges gravity. Every second, every moment, a decision is made. A decision to stand, or to fall. She places her body exactly where she has to be in this universe. Her body is eaten by insects, they crawl under her skin. And yet – she devours the world.

I have a strong physical reaction whenever I see Ashikawa Yoko dance – on stage, in the Tomoe Shizune & Hakutobo¹ studio where we rehearsed, and in the teaching sessions when I felt her strong presence directly in my flesh. I have seen her dance on stage on many occasions since 1988, but I have only seen the choreography of Hijikata Tatsumi for her on film. Even in those old, shadowy videos, Ashikawa communicates her physicality and passion. Her dance terrifies me and makes me joyful at the same time. I sense urgency. I sense a moment of infinity.

My body and I as a person were challenged directly by Ashikawa in the years 1988 to 1993 in Japan, when I was a student at the Tomoe Shizune & Hakutobo studio in Tokyo. I was trained to be a dancer through Ashikawa's choreography and Tomoe's vision. My thinking has been formed through being active in this lineage internationally as a butoh dancer and choreographer since 1992. I write this text in love and faith. Ashikawa's words and body have changed my life.

Being part of Hijikata's body

Human beings are in constant interaction with the physical reality around us. Human creation is a way to process this relationship. Resistance forces art forms to make a leap in their own evolution. Hijikata's *ankoku butoh*² is such a leap. Inseparable from the politics and social context of Japan in the 1950s and 1960s, it was also a fierce creation of a rebellious reality that transcended the norms and definitions of its environment. A situation with two simultaneous realities makes life and art disturbingly interesting. Japanese avant-garde artistic expression was pinned between East and West; between the traditional body and the modern body; between aesthetic and artistic values; between life/nature and civilization; and between the conceptualizing body and the organic body. From this an explosive dance form emerged – the premiere of Hijikata's first butoh

performance *Kinjiki* (Forbidden Colors) in Daiichi Seimei Hall transfigured the performance world of Tokyo in 1959.

Hijikata's *ankoku butoh* was a process involving many bodies together in space. When does the body become artistic material? Is it in the ideas of the creator? Is it the process of training, choreographing, and transferring those ideas into another body? Is it when the dance is put on stage? Ashikawa was the body through which Hijikata realized his artistic vision. The explosive artistic and human relationship of Hijikata and Ashikawa lasted some 20 years until his death in 1986. Ashikawa, born in Chiba Prefecture in 1947, joined Hijikata's home and studio Asbestos-kan³ in 1967. She was an art student at Musashino Art University. At Asbestos-kan, the butoh students lived, trained, and worked. Some also had jobs in the floating world: burlesque, dance cabaret, and night clubs. Ashikawa describes her encounter with Asbestos-kan in her essays "Searching for the Other Person in the Body" and "A Room with a View of the Grave":

While I wandered like a cat in downtown Shinjuku, I happened to arrive at the house of the dark dance of Butoh in Meguro. Hijikata Tatsumi lived there. At first everything took me by surprise. Hijikata paid a strange attention to his body. For example, when he went to the public bath, he didn't come back for about 3 hours, and while his upper garments were all normal, he wore only women's underwear. However, soon I understood that it was a method of training his body, and I longed to undertake this method of training.

1990, 15

The things I heard in Hijikata's studio were almost always impossible to understand, but the fact that they were so incomprehensible was in itself thrilling. From the time I came to stay with Hijikata and the several men who were living there together, I realized that even when they were speaking in this difficult language, which seemed so wrapped up in mystery, they were hard at physical training, competing against each other in a contest of beauty and ugliness which reached the last recesses of the flesh.

n.d., 1

Hijikata had many students and followers, and he taught and guided them differently according to their talents and abilities. The opportunity to create work with an artistic talent such as Ashikawa gave new momentum to his choreography and he concentrated on creating the *butoh-fu*⁴ choreography and method through her body. Ashikawa was trusted to assist him, to take choreographic notes for performances, and to teach *butoh-fu* and the choreography to the other dancers at Asbestos-kan.

Choreography⁵ in the lineage of Hijikata's work has a very strong relationship to words. The butoh words are born out of the reality of the body and the incitement for the dance. In Hijikata's work method, the way I understand it through Ashikawa's teaching and work, the words provide the intentions, and the dancer embodies the reality/shape/essence of the words. The process of this creation could include the use of pictures, stories, the teacher showing the form, experiments, improvisations, or concrete observations in daily life (for example, being silent a whole day or watching the smoke from the boiling pot for hours or crawling on legs and arms as an animal for a week), to reach the goal. After passing through several phases of fierce discipline, a new choreography or material is ready. Only when the merging of words and body is complete is there dance. Hijikata's and Ashikawa's intense artistic relationship demanded strength, motivation, and intelligence, both intellectual and physical, from both. Complete trust was placed in the other. They fearlessly entered unknown territories, where no answers were given, just more questions

posed. Ashikawa embodied *ankoku butoh* and provided the resistance for the dance form to develop. We can only understand the work of Hijikata by seeing him dance. And, we can only understand his work by seeing Ashikawa dance.

Ashikawa reflects upon the training process in her essay “Searching for the Other Person in the Body”:

One day, he asked us, “What is the furthest thing?” When nobody could reply, he said “It’s a body.” I was wondering about this when I stood on the floor, I understood it. I saw that existence itself is full of shame. In the face of this shame, I couldn’t even make a finger move. It was not a matter whether I could dance or not. After struggling, I noticed there was no other way but self-abandonment. At last, I noticed and found where my body was, after I felt the shame of my existence. Therefore we need a remedy to let our existence become shameful, and the remedy itself is words, existence is driven by words.

1990, 15

Beyond technique, beyond body

The dance of Ashikawa gained fame as she became the main performer in Hijikata’s *butoh*. The Hakutobo Company was founded by Hijikata in 1974 with Ashikawa as the main dancer. In 1974 she was awarded the 6th Annual Award of the *Buyo hihyoka kyokai* (Dance Critics Association) and the association’s 7th Annual Award the following year. In 1978 Ashikawa danced in Hijikata’s choreography *Yami no mairime junitai – Ruburukyu no tame no juyonban* (*Fortnight for the Louvre Palace – Twelve Phases of Dancing Princess of Darkness*) at the *Festival d’Automne à Paris, Ma* exhibition – Time and Space in Paris, which was one of the early events that presented *butoh* overseas. She participated in the Japan Arts Festival in 1983 where she danced the leading role in Hijikata’s *Nippon no Chibusa* (*The Breasts of Japan*).

In many of Hijikata’s works, Ashikawa danced the central part, appearing in one solo after another, accompanied by the ensemble in minor parts. Each solo contains a story of the smallest detail of daily life as well as the most remote phenomena of the universe. We see layers and layers of questions regarding body, culture, as well as absurd stories, silliness, and fantastical ideas. I would now like to reflect on some of my favorite dances I have seen on film.

In *Hitogata* (*Human Shape*), choreographed by Hijikata in 1976, Ashikawa dances a little demon in one solo, dressed in a short red padded kimono, a wig on her head, Ashikawa moves beyond the common sense of what human limbs can become. The tension and erasing of tension makes her movements very light and very quick. Her jumps and kicks remind us of an insect that is suddenly on the other side of the room. There is also a playfulness, a fooling around energy that challenges the spectators’ intellectual approach as to how to perceive dance. As a being made of dust in a later solo, Ashikawa is paper thin and fragile as a leaf. Her breath seems to be the color grey, and there is a smell of old paper – as in an attic in an old house. Her flesh has a transparent quality. Her body is light as dust, yet shows a being that has lived many decades. In the end, Ashikawa sits on a raised part of the stage, suddenly lighting up an imaginary cigarette, becoming the old lady next door.

In the opening solo of *Geisenjo no Okugata* (*Lady on a Whale String*), choreographed by Hijikata in 1976, Ashikawa, dressed in black with a headpiece resembling a fin, dances in front of a large, hanging, metal ring. Her body changes from being as hard as a steel pillar, into a hanging, empty condition where the intention to stand is undermined. She might be a piece of meat hanging on a hook. Her body becomes this hook. She masters an isolation technique, cutting her body into chunks, like a chair losing one leg and falling apart. In the next short solo, Ashikawa



Figure 22.1 Ashikawa Yoko in *Hitogata* (1976), photographer unknown. Courtesy of Morishita Takashi and the Hijikata Tatsumi Archive, Keio University Art Center.

is elegantly costumed in a red gown and cap. The dance has influences from burlesque, often incorporated in those days. In the beginning, her body is firmly positioned at center stage and unwilling to move from there. Suddenly she shifts into a snake type body, the snake arms being so fluid, slipping away like snake saliva. There is one snake, then another – and suddenly 1,000 snakes in her body. The transparent quality in her arms provides a new definition of arms, far

from the everyday tools we use. In the last moments of this dance, Ashikawa stands frozen, her hands to her face. Her breathing ceases. All bodily processes are harnessed internally. A moment of utmost loneliness. Grief embodied.

Ashikawa's dance and body is so immersed in a task that it is larger than her own intentions, and beyond any technique. She pulls the spectator into her body, through her skin, behind her



Figure 22.2 Ashikawa Yoko in *Geisenjo no Okugata* (1976), photograph by Nakatani Tadao. Courtesy of Nakatani Tadashi and the Hijikata Tatsumi Archive, Keio University Art Center.



Figure 22.3 Ashikawa Yoko in *Geisenjo no Okugata* (1976), photograph by Nakatani Tadao. Courtesy of Nakatani Tadashi and the Hijikata Tatsumi Archive, Keio University Art Center.

face. This ability to show a landscape, induce smell and color, to change the space, to change from something very hard into something very soft, gives us a hint of the essence of *ankoku butoh*. We are bewildered at the power of human existence and the essence of living. Ashikawa as a dancer continues to develop and change over time. Transcending form, human existence, and every intention of art, Ashikawa is one of the world's astonishing dancers of transformation.

The extended Butoh Body

Having been a member and student of the Tomoe Shizune & Hakutobo studio for several years showed me how the choreographic philosophy is an extension of daily life. To explore and define one's identity as a dancer and artistic body, the concept of the Butoh Body⁶ is under constant investigation. The Butoh Body means the inside quality and intention of the existence and condition as it is placed on stage. The Butoh Body is an extended body. It is a living artistic organism, in intense interaction with the world around it. This body cannot be seen without the space around it, it cannot live without all the other living beings, it cannot move without the tension of different realities. The Butoh Body does not exist without other bodies.

After the death of Hijikata in 1986, Ashikawa continued his work with the dancers in the group. In this instance the Butoh Company Hakutobo comprised Ashikawa and the other female dancers.⁷ The company eventually relocated from Asbestos-kan in Meguro to their own headquarters in Kokubunji and later to Nishi-Ogikubo, in the western suburbs of Tokyo. The transmission of Ashikawa's artistic body into her dancers' bodies took the work in a new direction. This long-term process with a committed group of dancers produced the possibility of developing work, in which every person/body is as important as the others. The members, all quite different as persons and with different talents for dance, all contribute to the work. The rich material of existing choreographies and phrases from Hijikata were stylized and developed in this process. Words changed, phrases were taken apart and re-organized, and new material was created in the process. The emphasis was on the quality of the Butoh Body as the starting point of the choreography. The extended Butoh Body of Hakutobo is unique and would not have been achieved without the complete dedication of the dancers. I and some other devoted students had a unique opportunity to be part of this process. The community living of Hakutobo and shared finances, at that time earned through burlesque performances, provided the practical infrastructure for the artistic productions.

Art, punk, and color through the body

Ashikawa's own choreography, starting in 1987, was a vivid, explosive step. She choreographed and directed a series of productions in which two Hakutobo performers were the lead butoh dancers in each work, mainly at the tiny performance space Plan B in Nakano, Tokyo. Dance journalist and critic Kuniyoshi Kazuko described the work *Hifu ni naru Inu Doke* (Skin Clock for Those Wishing to Become a Dog):

The provocative method of the year-long series *Skin Clock for Those Wishing to Become a Dog*, which began in January 1987, was the rawest of sketches, a wild scrawl which repudiated any inclusive flow towards completion cutting remorselessly through time yet coming together from the most incongruous direction, and was a fire-bell to the flesh, which if left to itself would immediately show a nostalgic yearning for stability. The violent fragmentation and bold composition of these performances sustained a

highly charged atmosphere which spurned whatever discourse attempted to insinuate itself. Though seemingly an outright desertion of butoh, I saw this series as a biting critique of butoh the part of Ashikawa.

1990, 5

In the following years Ashikawa choreographed a series of productions directed by Tomoe with each Hakutoho dancer as the main performer – their debut performance.⁸ Performances such as *Nichi-rin* (Sun Wheel), with lead dancer Ashikawa Shoko, and *Getsu-rin* (Moon Wheel), with lead dancer Ashikawa Megumi, both from 1988, show Ashikawa's dedication to forming this new generation of strong dancers. She put equal emphasis on the solo parts for the main dancer, and the intricate ensemble parts, and together the performance grew to an integrated whole. The choreographic language demands that each dancer's part adds artistic material to the pieces, and therefore the dancer must train to have the skills to do that. These many performances contain edgy, funny, and beautiful dance, and we can sense Ashikawa's background in formal visual arts in their expression. The choreography vibrates of art, punk, and color; young and fresh, still with dignity and a serious investigation of butoh.

In all Ashikawa's choreography, costumes, stage art, music, and spatial design are crucial. Ashikawa designed the costumes and all the dancers constructed them. Stage sets were created by collaborating artists or by the company. All the dancers needed the skills required to work with various materials in order to create what was needed. The visual aspect as well as the choreography was never considered to be final. The choreography or spatial placements would suddenly change as the final rehearsals took place on stage. In some cases there would even be shouted commandos from the side stage during performance or Ashikawa would even throw 5 yen coins on stage if we made a mistake.

From 1988 to 1990, Ashikawa was summer lecturer at the American Dance Festival International Dance School, and also performed internationally with Suzuki Tadashi's theatre productions and appeared in Yoshida Kiju's *Madame Butterfly* in Lyon, France. The next stage in Ashikawa's choreography developed in close relationship with Tomoe Shizune, the company's artistic director from the middle of the 1980s. Tomoe, having his background in music, defined the body in relationship to space and sound and in this way expanded the outline of the Butoh Body. In *Nyushoku no Onna* (Milky Woman) from 1988 with Ashikawa Seisaku as a lead dancer and *Shumu* (String Universal Dream) from 1988, directed by Tomoe and choreographed by Ashikawa, we see this exciting progress. With Ashikawa's intense training, all the dancers had developed a Butoh Body quality and virtuosity. The work is not underground anymore; and *Shumu*, ready for a larger and international audience, toured to the Netherlands. I would like to reflect upon Ashikawa's central solo in *Shumu*, which I have seen her dance in several versions on stage and on film.

She stands alone, separated from all of us. She places herself at the very center of stage and of time and space. Her costume is a dark brown gown, a kimono worn back to front, her hair softly fluffed out around her head. Her dance reveals the past, present, and future. She slices time and eats space. Her body is surrounded by the space, not swallowed by it and not fighting it. Body and space are one. Through her face, she conveys utmost raw beauty, like a sculpture shaped in rock. This rock has cracks in it. It is made rugged by rain and wind. There is an animal, an old lady, a child. They are all connected through time. This solo, unique to Ashikawa, is a turning point between Hijikata-style *butoh-fu* and the aesthetic influence of Tomoe. Ashikawa's body seems to have reached the essence of the dance rather than the intention of shape. Her dance has qualities that reach beyond butoh.

The body of the impossible

A great teacher does not give up on you. She interferes, disturbs, and challenges you until there is a shift, a change. She forces you beyond limitations and fear. Ashikawa, with Tomoe's artistic vision as fuel, is such a teacher.

In the Butoh Body of Ashikawa, the teaching, choreographing, and performing are inseparable. The teaching of Ashikawa aims concretely and immediately at achieving the artistic for the stage.⁹ She challenged the Hakutobo dancers and we other students to take butoh further; not just repeating shapes from the past. There was a sense of speed and urgency – and no time to intellectualize. The dance emerged from her body and that body was transferred to us. Ashikawa referred sometimes to pictures from art books and described physical reality through words or displayed the actual objects. She also danced with us, and we followed, pulled along by her intense energy. The existing Hijikata *butoh-fu* was still used as a base, but seen as tools for something new. Many existing phrases were re-used, colored by new material and choreographic ideas, and they emerged as very different. The smell, texture, color, and qualities were central. Sometimes she took us outdoors, placing us in a certain environment. This infused reality into the dance we recreated in the studio. We were told to look at “real” things. Underlying the training was the question “Why are you doing this?” The training was encompassed in straight-forward questions, and we dancers were expected to show an actual change in our performance. We can say, “Yes, I understand” easily. However, if this change cannot be perceived in the body or in the space in performance, then it has yet to happen. We had to struggle to put her abandonment of intention into our performance. If one of us did not reach the point she aspired to, Ashikawa would angrily run out of the studio, leaving us in uncertainty until she returned with new energy.

Even if I could not understand all of this at the time, I can share some important notes from training with Ashikawa:

To go on stage is to fall into unknown space.

We must create an uncertain situation in the body, enter the danger.

We need to find extreme detail and chaos at the same time.

Try the impossible!

We must look at the real world and find the interesting things.

Look for the things we cannot see . . . like the layers of paint in a painting.

Just do it!

Turn the body upside down/inside out.

Don't think you know anything . . .

Dance is not something to keep for yourself!

Don't be serious, it is all a game!

To be taught and choreographed by Ashikawa is to stand on the edge of a volcano. She rocks the ground beneath our feet. Her words, sharp as knives, reach for that point of transformation in the dancer's body beyond tears, where the Butoh Body is alive and sparkling. I celebrate this each time I go on stage.

Creative challenges for the body

As the Butoh Body is transmitted from body to body, from teacher to student, the method naturally changes. The materials, choreography, and phrases start to be alive in another person's

body. In one way this happens in a second, but takes years until it reaches clarity. I trace my own work to Ashikawa's Butoh Body, and back to the original source of Hijikata's *butoh-fu*. But it is not a fixed method or form. I cannot teach another person's method or dance another person's dance. Aiming for change and making the next performance are the keywords of Ashikawa's work.

Here is a summary of my reflections on the Butoh Body transferred from Ashikawa:

Butoh materials cannot be copied, but must be reborn again and again in the student's/dancer's body. If there is no passion or fire, it is just empty shapes.

The learning process is not something to master alone, the teacher and the group provides the resistance for the Butoh Body to become alive. Years and years of hard training with one's teacher is the only way.

Butoh materials contain limitations at first, but lead to ultimate freedom beyond shape. This training is not for the weak-hearted or for the person who wants a quick and easy solution.

The Butoh Body must dance on stage. Without an audience it does not exist. We must offer ourselves as dancers, as bodies to the audience, which provides resistance for the dance to become real.

The method from Ashikawa and Tomoe provides tools for challenging the body, for creating a dancing transformative body for stage and infinite possibilities of choreographing new work. This method holds the secrets to give birth to "something" out of "nothing," to make even the dirt and the darkness shine. There is tension. It is creation.

Nature screams and whispers

Hifu Uchu no Magudara (Magdalene of the Skin-Cosmos, 1989), directed by Tomoe and choreographed by Ashikawa, was performed on only one occasion. I saw it on stage at Togamura Festival, where I helped out. In this beautiful performance we hear how nature whispers, speaks, sings, and screams. The entire Hakutobo Company performs. The main roles are danced by Ashikawa as the Old Tree, dressed in dark brown and Ashikawa Uzumi as the Young Tree, dressed in spring green. The visual image is so simple, yet provides a profound realization of the connection between humans and nature. The choreography, the costumes, stage sets, and also the music composition by Tomoe connect the body to the ever-ongoing process of life and death in nature. The Young Tree is born out of a seed from the Old Tree. They exist together in the forest surrounded by other living beings. There is a storm and the Old Tree fractures and falls. The Old Tree has left this life, and now the Young Tree has to live on by herself. The spirit of the Old Tree comes back and dances around the Young Tree. Death is not the end, just the start of another existence. Ashikawa's dance has evolved and aged. She dances on the border between life and death. Her transparent fingertips, the spiral shaped lines through her body, her breath as a black hole, the twisting power through her flesh, the layers of skin around her bones all make me consider my own existence. I am moved to the core of my being. What can we do in this short moment on this planet and in this life? What does it mean to be human? The living body grows just like a tree. Roots, branches, leaves. Insects eating its inside, birds building nests at the top. Wind blowing and tearing at it. When I investigate my place in this universe, placing my body clearly, and listen with wonder, secrets are revealed.

From 1990 and onwards, Ashikawa appears less and less on stage, and mainly in a shorter solo with Tomoe and Hakutobo in *Renyo* (Far from the Lotus), directed and choreographed by

Tomoe, and presented internationally, and then retired from being lead dancer but still having an important role with the company.

Her own words from the article “A Room with a View of the Grave”:

Memory, recollection, and the unconscious belong to the class of things gathered and made, while ideas which belong to the body can travel to any depth or distance, to the farthest extremes of light and dark. If one can return again and again from where one has gone, if one can know the route of going and returning, one can be reborn at will from the edge of darkness.

n.d., 1

The Butoh Body is a living body. Time passes, realities shift. Still, life remains. Light as dust, hard as steel, fluid as snake saliva, the Butoh Body of Ashikawa Yoko dances on!

In loving memory of Seki Yumiko, fellow student in the group Gnome. I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to Ashikawa Yoko, and the members of Hakutobo at the time I had the privilege of being in the training: Ashikawa Uzumi, Ashikawa Mito, Ashikawa Shoko, Ashikawa Megumi, Ashikawa Akeno, Ashikawa Seisaku, and Irizawa Hisashi. I also would like to extend my deepest gratitude to Tomoe Shizune, the artistic director of Tomoe Shizune & Hakutobo. Thanks to Gilles Kennedy, Richard Hart, and Miyagawa Rieko.

Notes

- 1 Tomoe Shizune has been the artistic director of the Hakutobo company since the mid-1980s.
- 2 *Ankoku butoh*: Hijikata's name for his dance. Generally translated as “Dance of Darkness,” meaning what is unexplored and unknown to us.
- 3 Hijikata's and his wife Motofuji's home and studio in Meguro.
- 4 *Butoh-fū*: Hijikata's notational butoh. The dance follows a set choreography and score, based on his method.
- 5 Choreography: the Japanese words *furi*, *furitsuke* or the English word “text” would be used for the overall choreography. For the shorter sections the English word “phrase” could be used.
- 6 The Butoh Body: Japanese word is *butoh-tai*.
- 7 In the period described, Hakutobo comprised seven dancers, six women and one man. The dancers all had stage names and also took the family name of Ashikawa, similar to the conventions of traditional Japanese performing arts. Some of the dancers now use other names, some remain with Tomoe Shizune & Hakutobo, and some have stopped dancing.
- 8 Debut performance: *hata-age kōen* meaning “raising the flag.” A performance presenting a dancer to the world as part of the lineage and as an independent dancer.
- 9 Participation in Gnome and Hakutobo performances, training by Ashikawa Yoko, Tomoe Shizune, and the Hakutobo dancers, 1988–1993. Received the stage name SU-EN at *Kaze no Cho* (Butterfly of the Wind), the debut performance of SU-EN Butoh Company in 1992 at Tiny Alice in Shinjuku, Tokyo. SU-EN's notebooks from training 1988–1993. Documented discussions regarding training, performance, the Butoh Body, and the development of the Tomoe Shizune method in the Hakutobo studio.

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Performances

Hitogata (Human Shape), 1976, video.

Geisenjo no Okugata (Lady on a Whale String), 1976, video.

Hifu ni naru Inu Doke (Skin Clock for those Wishing to Become a Dog), 1987, video.

Nichi-rin (Sun Wheel), 1988, video.

Getsu-rin (Moon Wheel), 1988, video.

Nyushoku no Onna (Milky Woman), 1988, on stage at Jean Jean, Shibuya, Tokyo and video.

Shumu (String Universal Dream), 1988, several versions in several locations, and video.

Hifu Uchu no Magudara (Magdalene of the Skin-Cosmos), 1989, on stage at Togamura Festival and video.

Renyo (Far from the Lotus), 1992–1993 on stage in U.S. and Japan, several versions and on video.