

This article was downloaded by: 10.3.98.93

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Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



The Routledge Companion to  
Butoh Performance



Edited by Bruce Baird and Rosemary Candelario

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### Oscillation and Regeneration

Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315536132-26>

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**Published online on: 28 Aug 2018**

**How to cite :-** Iwaki Kyoko. 28 Aug 2018, *Oscillation and Regeneration from: The Routledge Companion to Butoh Performance* Routledge

Accessed on: 19 Jan 2019

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315536132-26>

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## 25

OSCILLATION AND  
REGENERATION

## The temporal aesthetics of Sankai Juku

*Iwaki Kyoko*

Amagatsu Ushio, the founder and artistic director of Sankai Juku, is an artist who ruminates through the process of sedimentation: dripping and dropping superfluous thoughts. Opposing the western classical ballet tradition, in which narratives are constructed through a dialectic development, or, differing from the collective brainstorming methodology of Hijikata Tatsumi, whereby a pool of literary and iconographic imageries are thrown pell-mell into the creative vessel, Amagatsu, conversely, peels off redundant concepts, aesthetics, and semiotics. This method of “creative filtration” has been adopted from his very first work *Amagatsu-shō* (1977): A metaphorical tale of an *amagatsu*, an ancient Japanese doll that used to be placed by a child’s bed as a talisman (Amagatsu 2015, 23).

Moreover, since many of Amagatsu’s choreographies are variations of the same theme, one could cogently argue that, for more than four decades since the founding of his company in 1975, Amagatsu has been committed to the same reflexive sedimentation for the sake of discovering what he calls the *sokei*: an archetype of humans (not in terms of Jungian psychology, but more to do with physical bodies), which, like Leonardo Da Vinci’s *L’Uomo Vitruviano*, could become the guideline for measuring the forms, movements, and the overall physical aesthetics of his dance (Amagatsu 2015, 20).<sup>1</sup> By the same token, although there are many other interpretations in terms of why *shironuri* (powdering the bodies in pallid white) is adopted in butoh performances, for Amagatsu, it has to do with highlighting the dancers’ bodies as mere archetypes – an anonymous “canvas of bodies,” that is devoid of “personal features and characteristics of the profane world” (ibid. 108).

Quotidian aesthetics and social topicalities have never seeped into the theatrical cosmogony of Sankai Juku. For Amagatsu, immediate social components responding to the zeitgeist are cheap auxiliaries, which do not form the quintessence of an artwork. However, it is too simple to deduce, from here, that Amagatsu’s works conversely approach the realm of mysticism and spiritualism. In fact, countering those critics who assert that ‘obscurantism’ is taken as a ‘creed’ in Sankai Juku, Amagatsu has not spoken in mystical language in interviews and conversations conducted over the past decade-plus years (Crisp 2008). Rather, most of his words are supported by references from natural science such as anthropology, cosmology, paleontology, or evolutionary biology. In contrast to those ready assumptions that a certain form of spiritualism is practiced in Sankai Juku, the choreographer has admitted that dancers meditate no more than a professional

athlete preparing for a run; Amagatsu, himself, swims three times a week but also never meditates (Iwaki 2017).<sup>2</sup>

Before expanding the argument on Sankai Juku's aesthetics, however, at this point it is important to provide the basic facts of Amagatsu and his company. Amagatsu Ushio, born in 1949 as Ueshima Masakazu, is the leader, choreographer, designer, and dancer of Sankai Juku (Mountain Ocean Laboratory), which he formed in November 1975. Amagatsu's stage name as well as the company name, were suggested by Maro Akaji: the leader of another butoh company Dairakudakan (Great Camel Battleship), in which Amagatsu participated for three years before forming his own company. When the two Chinese characters, mountain and ocean, are paired together, they suggest the name of *Shan hai jing* (Guideways through Mountains and Seas): a Chinese classical text, which compiles various mythologies from the pre-Qin era.<sup>3</sup> On April 27 and 28, 1977, *Amagatsu-shō* the first piece by Sankai Juku was presented at Nihon Shōbō Kaikan, Tokyo. However, not satisfied with the overall quality of it, Amagatsu deployed much of its content to develop another show the next year: *Kinkan Shōnen*. His second piece was a great success, and caught the attention of Gérald Coste, the then French Cultural Counselor based in Japan. It was Coste who introduced Sankai Juku to France, and thanks to him, from 1982, the company have had a long and fruitful relationship with Théâtre de la Ville, Paris, through which they have co-produced new shows every other year (Kuniyoshi 1986, 138–141). And, fully utilizing the artistic prestige of Théâtre de la Ville for the next four decades, Sankai Juku has been one of the most well-known and well-traveled butoh companies in the world.

Isolated from the everyday world, yet not entering the realm of spiritual mumbo jumbo, Sankai Juku has managed to speak to the audiences of more than seven hundred cities across the globe. It is arguable whether there is a 'universally' valid aesthetics that speaks to the world, but through the decades of global-trotting, Amagatsu argues that, at least in his own terms, he has understood that, there exist both "universality as well as differences" across all cultures:

During the 1980s, I was experiencing a different culture, literally, on a day-to-day basis. . . . Yet, from that experience, I realized that, as a Japanese man, I have fundamental feelings, which could be shared universally, yet, on the other hand, there are things that I cannot share but could appreciate as differences.

*Amagatsu 2015, 15*

In 2007, when I conducted a yearlong interview session for drafting his biographical book, *Ushio Amagatsu, des rivages d'enfance au butō de Sankai Juku* (2013, translated into Japanese in 2015), Amagatsu affirmed that he has reached three "rudimentary (*chisetsu-na*)" questions which, according to the choreographer, should transcend cultural differences, and which Amagatsu distilled into the crux of his oeuvre: "What is life and death?" "What is time?" and "What is a human body?" (Amagatsu 2015, 97). At the outset, the three questions seem like distinct entities. However, when continually communicating by the same choreographer for over a decade, one naturally begins to understand that these questions are deeply entangled at the root. That is, since the issue of life and death is connected to the question of time, and, because the interrogation of a human body is inseparable from the investigation of immortality, one could argue that, the three questions converge to form a single philosophical quest: reflections on time.

Rigorous guardians of butoh have attacked the elegant and sophisticated aesthetics of Sankai Juku as an unduly purified form of dance that "abstracts butoh's immanent modality" (Gōda 1984). They have been accused of adding "a designer sophistication to the style" (Roy 2003). Indeed, compared to the provocative words used to describe Hijikata's *ankoku butoh*, such as "a ritual of a heresy" (Mishima Yukio), "terrorism and scandal" (Shibusawa Tatsuhiko), and "a

terrifying comedy” (Takiguchi Shūzō; Morishita 2004), Amagatsu’s artistic language seems by comparison too elegant and luminous – especially after he started to work in France from 1980. Yet being a second-generation butoh choreographer, who was born by the tranquil seaside of Yokosuka after the Second World War, and an artist, who developed his career by being supported by Gérard Violette, the former director of Théâtre de la Ville, Amagatsu felt more comfortable presenting his works at “the catacombs of Rome and monuments of Paris,” rather than representing the pains and struggles of the former butoh choreographers: quite simply, they were not in his artistic blood (Brandon 1990, 90).

This comment may raise the question that perhaps Amagatsu’s choreographies should not be described as butoh at all. Yet countering this common critique, Amagatsu asserts that since his initial encounter in the early-1970s with Hijikata and Maro has inscribed indelible marks on his artistic vision – which is exemplified, for instance, by his references to French literature such as Arthur Rimbaud, and his many collaborations with the artist Nakanishi Natsuyuki – he has the right to call himself a butoh artist, by origin.

Notwithstanding the fact that some critics condemned his delicate aesthetics, its utter beauty, has transfixed many more. Especially after the success at the Théâtre de la Ville, the “refined and polished aesthetics,” which communicated well to the sophisticated dance and theater connoisseurs in Paris, attained an aura of symbolic capital, so to speak, which, on the one hand, reassured Western audiences that nothing too unexpected would happen on the stage, and on the other, captivated non-Western audiences with its French undertone (Brotman 2007, 50). Greatly owing to this aesthetic sophistication, the artworks of Sankai Juku have been analyzed, primarily, through their visual components such as costumes (a loincloth wrapped over a *shironuri* body, or a cape of a child transforming into a graceful dress of a dance macabre performer); stage settings (from countless tuna tails amassed to form a mural in *Kinkan Shōnen*, to a pool surrounded by corridors with floating eggs in *Unetsu*); light designs (various angled lights suggesting the passing of time in *Tōki*, or the twinkling of stars embellishing the moonless backdrop in *Tōbari*); and, of course, the bodies, which are often described as analogous to carved figures: “classical Greek sculpture” (Sirvin 1986) or “the relief sculptures of an ancient Indian temple” (Hariki 2006).

In contrast to these numerous cosmetic analyses, however, Sankai Juku’s artistry has been rarely assessed through temporal components. To be more precise, although Amagatsu’s above-noted rudimentary questions are more or less related to the concept of time, most butoh studies have decided not to focus on the temporal language that Amagatsu adopts: what he calls “the unadulterated time (*seiso-na jikan*),” which he aims to envisage on the stage (Kage 1983, 79).<sup>4</sup> The term *seiso-na* epitomizes various ambiances that Amagatsu stages, such as simplicity, purity, relaxation, and gentleness. In addition, the term describes a mode of time, whereby distinct temporal qualities are synchronically experienced and regenerated at each instance. Rather than assembling the past moments to accumulatively reach the future, every moment “oscillates (*kyōshin*) and resonates (*kyōmei*)” between “dynamic and static, silence and noise, darkness and light,” to compose an unmarked and unknown instance (Amagatsu 2015, 78, 93). Just like various kinds of microscopic matter start their lives through gentle vibrations of an ovum, in many works of Sankai Juku, time vibrates, or, to be more precise, oscillates, between seemingly dichotomous modes of time.

The theory of “oscillating time” is one of the temporal components that Amagatsu often adopts in his works (Maki 2003, 19). For example, in *Unetsu: The Egg Stands Out of Curiosity* (1986), time goes back and forth between the opposing concepts of birth and death. The two notions are juxtaposed, firstly, by applying water and sand as settings: “the water evokes origin . . . and the sand could be considered the last of all objects” (Amagatsu and Fukuda 1994, 3). However, the oscillation between birth and death is more vividly represented by a critical

moment, in which the egg-shaped object, held up by Amagatsu, who looks like an ancient timekeeper, is demolished, instantaneously, by water pressure. In the second “tableau” (a term that Amagatsu uses for suggesting scenes) of the piece, Amagatsu silently gesticulates with an egg-shaped object, eloquently using his tentacle-like fingers tinted with scarlet rouge. His movements convey to the audience the feelings of anticipation, expectation, and hope towards an unborn life. Though caught within the laws of gravity, the egg that vertically stands on the ground seems “to be in a very relaxed state” (Amagatsu 2015, 60). Later on in the fourth tableau, Amagatsu holds up this self-composed egg against a gentle water cascade at the stage left upstage, and, after a few seconds, the egg, no longer able to bear the water pressure, is shattered into pieces (Shiota 2003, 212).

The destruction of the egg concurrently symbolizes birth and death. As Amagatsu asserts, “creation and destruction occur at the same time” (Amagatsu and Fukuda 1994, 3). If the water cascade is interpreted as the birth canal of a mother, the egg is broken for the sake of a newborn life; if it is considered as a flow of mortal time, then, the demolition suggests death – the being can no longer bear the struggles of life that fall upon it. In other words, the moment of the destruction epitomizes the oscillating time, as it were, in which death is not placed at the accumulative end point of life, but is represented in tandem with life. In *Unetsu*, or, in fact, in all works of Sankai Juku, there is no linear structure of narratives; thus, a certain moment does not become obsolete with the passing of time.

Every moment seems to be ephemeral as well as eternally recurrent, as on the stage, time freely travels back and forth between prehistoric past and cosmological future. Put differently, one could argue that, in the works of Sankai Juku, the concept of time is not represented in an accumulative linear or cyclic format, but rather is experienced as a pendulum pattern. In Judeo-Christian tradition, time is a one-way path in which the future fundamentally differs from what has gone before. To use a biblical image, time progresses from Creation to the Judgment Day. In contrast, in the artworks of Sankai Juku, time is a sequence of oscillations between what many modern people think as opposite temporal archetypes such as “night and day, winter and summer, drought and flood, age and youth, life and death” (Leach 1966, 126). In other words, more often than not, the boundaries between the seemingly distinct concepts of time are blurred in their works: the paired temporal components coexist side by side.

As if to suggest the absence of a solid border between what are generally considered as opposite time components, especially in recent works, the minimalist stage of Sankai Juku is loosely compartmentalized by, for instance, scrims painted with red and blue veins (*Kara • Mi – Two Flows* 2010) or swaying black curtains creating Mondrian-like color blocks (*Umusuna – Memories Before History* 2012). Another representation of oscillating time could be observed in *Toki: A Moment in the Weave of Time* (2005). On the stage floor of this work, which reminds one of “an ancient ruin site,” a thin layer of sand is spread, and on top of the sand stands, in an asymmetrical array, “seven slabs reminiscent of the monolith in Kubrick’s *2001, A Space Odyssey*” (Hariki 2006). Between the slightly tilted slabs, the dancers strike postures, which are reminiscent of “an ancient Indian Brahmin monk in meditation” (ibid.).

The monks are segregated in individual shacks, tormented by their own anguish. However, when the dancers start gliding forward against the deep black of the backdrop, their movements suggest that they are also experiencing a collective time as they all reach for the thin metallic ring hung above – a life devoted to higher spirit, or simply a life spent under the sun. The slabs could also imply a menhir, a ring of standing stones like the Stonehenge, which could have been used to measure time in ancient times: to predict eclipse, solstice, equinox, and other celestial events. Just from this brief analysis, one can understand that Sankai Juku’s stage components are rendered to juxtapose different scales, qualities, and concepts of time.

When questioned by theatre critic Watanabe Tamotsu on “why his body strikes a perfect balance yet seems so carefree at the same time,” Amagatsu responded that, when dancing his solos, he simply “look[s] afar” (Watanabe 2009, 3). What Amagatsu specifically means by “afar” is that, he is trying to utilize his body as a catalyst, as it were, through which the audience can acknowledge the existence of a time beyond a human lifespan. For example, his physical arm length might only be around a meter-and-a-half long, however, virtually, Amagatsu’s arms could defy space-time and touch the moon:

You point at a faraway star on the stage. Then, in the next moment, you move that finger to the nearby star. Physically speaking, I am only moving my finger for a few centimeters. But when you think about the distance that I moved at the endpoint . . . , one understands that, in a split second, my finger has travelled for a hundred-million light years that exist between the stars. . . . When a dancer becomes capable of controlling this “thread of consciousness,” then, the dancer can spread his consciousness outside of the theatre, through the Earth’s atmosphere, and even reach outer space.

*Amagatsu 2015, 125*

In the same manner, when a dancer whirls, like a Sufi Dervish dancer in *Umusuna*, Amagatsu intends to represent time that travels back to prehistoric age. As the title of that scene clarifies, the spinning movement comes to signify a moment in which “*Tout ce qui naît* (All is born).” In other words, the spinning movements are presented not for the sake of formal beauty, but in order to symbolize and visualize the existence of another dimension of time. In *Shijima: The Darkness Calms Down in Space* (1988), the stage connotes a desert landscape with dry air, amber sand, and ossified mammals. Reminiscent of a ritual dance praying for rain, Amagatsu dances a duet with his shadow projected behind him. The identical physical features and synchronic movements, presented by Amagatsu and his larger shadow, metaphorically imply an existence of recurrent time. By seeing parallels between the dancer and the shadow behind, one understands that what Edward T. Hall calls the “silent thought” is, physically, inherited from ancestors and passed on to descendants (Hall 1973). That is, analogous to those young Balinese dancers who “learn dancing techniques from their mothers, . . . who manipulate the children’s bodies from behind,” Amagatsu, dancing in front of the shadow, becomes a man who represents his individual life as well as his accumulative ancestry (Amagatsu 2015, 130).

The luminous tableau vivant of Sankai Juku is constructed so as to convey multivalent layers of gentle and calm *seiso-na jikan* (unadulterated time). And, to reiterate, in Sankai Juku’s works, this qualitatively delicate time does not consist of a linear structure, but, rather, is constantly oscillating between seemingly dichotomous temporal concepts: night and day, the past and the present, the unborn and the newborn, the prehistoric and the cosmic time, and so forth. Through the continuous oscillation, time is regenerated at each new “birth” on whatever plane; and, thus, to borrow from Mircea Eliade, their artworks are capable of eliciting “an ontology uncontaminated by time and becoming” (Eliade 1971, 89).

A butoh artist such as Hijikata did not avoid the everyday in his aesthetics. Rather, in his works, quotidian pains constitute the marrow of his choreography. Conversely, Amagatsu aims to elicit a time-space that is uncontaminated by humdrum struggles: a time which can transcend the agonies of a human lifespan. Unlike numerous contemporary political theater artists and troupes that readily respond to the zeitgeist, for Amagatsu, art should avoid taking on a political tenor. Although some may criticize this as an escapist attitude, at least for Amagatsu, art becomes most powerful when it incarnates a purified time-space, which could tentatively shelter fallen men and women. Many wonder why they feel both intoxicated and detoxified after attending



a performance by Sankai Juku. Perhaps it is because, through the temporal aesthetics of Sankai Juku, the audience succeeds in dispelling the hassles of quotidian life and becomes indissolubly connected with ancient and cosmic rhythms.

### Notes

- 1 All translations for *Jūryoku to no taiwa: Kioku no kanata kara Sankai Juku no buto e* (*Dialogue with the Gravity: From Far Before Memories to Butoh of Sankai Juku*) are provided by the author unless otherwise indicated.
- 2 This was before Amagatsu was diagnosed with cancer in Autumn 2017. Since then, he has recreated earlier productions, such as *Unetsu: The Egg Stands Out of Curiosity* (1986), for younger members of his company.
- 3 See Richard E. Strassberg trans. and ed. *A Chinese Bestiary: Strange Creatures from the Guideways Through Mountains and Seas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).
- 4 A handful of scholars have written essays that focus on the temporal aesthetics of Sankai Juku. See, for instance, Sonia Delmas. “Penser le temps avec Deleuze et Sankai Juku.” *Kokusai Nihongaku (International Japanese Studies)* Vol. 7, October 2009; and Tachiki Akiko. “Tokeru jikan, bi to sōgon no gishiki kūkan (Dissolving Time, Ritual Space of Beauty and Solemnity).” *Dance Magazine*, August 2001, 60–62.

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