

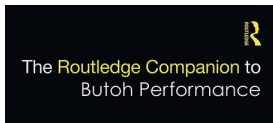
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A HISTORY OF FRENCH FASCINATION WITH BUTOH

Sylviane Pagès (translated by Sherwood Chen)

Since the late 1970s, one of butoh's deepest evolutions – as much aesthetic as economic – occurred in its export from Japan to North America and Europe. Dancers such as Eiko & Koma or Ishii Mitsutaka traveled to Germany and the Netherlands in the 1970s, while France also quickly became a landing ground for butoh. Beginning in 1978, significant prestigious productions in France¹ generated media shockwaves and an aesthetic impact on the French choreographic scene, serving as an important step in the global export of butoh. Drawing on my previous research on the reception of butoh in France, including an examination of the chronology of butoh in France and the sites of butoh activity, its critical reception, and its impact on contemporary dance (Pagès 2009c, 2015), I will analyze the stages of the French fascination with butoh, the reasons for its success and its effects.

Initial reception in France

An instant success

Upon its arrival in France at the end of the 1970s, butoh immediately met with public and critical acclaim, sparking widespread fascination and critical discourse. The first butoh performance recognized as such was Murobushi Kō's *Le Dernier Eden: Porte de l'au-delà* (The Last Eden: Gate to the Beyond) in collaboration with Carlotta Ikeda, performed at the *Nouveau Carré Silvia Monfort* theater in Paris in January 1978. That same year, also in Paris, both Ashikawa Yoko and Tanaka Min presented solos during the *Festival d'Automne*.² Public shock was all the stronger considering that these dancers performed extremely close to the audience in the heart of the Museum of Decorative Arts during the exhibition *Ma, espace-temps du Japon* (Ma: Space-Time in Japan).³ These initial butoh productions were repeated a number of times and were attended by a notable cadre of artists, presenters, curators, and intellectuals including Michel Foucault, Roger Caillois, Jean Baudrillard, Henri Michaux, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari.⁴

Soon after, in 1980, the *Festival Mondial du Théâtre de Nancy* (World Theater Festival at Nancy) offered further opportunities to discover butoh through performances by Ohno Kazuo, Kasai Akira, Amagatsu Ushio's *Sankai Juku*, and, yet again, Tanaka. Despite the varied reception of these artists – Amagatsu and Ohno kindled a new aesthetic shock, whereas Kasai would pass almost unnoticed – the word *butoh* acquired broader recognition and began to be perceived as

an artistic movement, categorizing artists who would claim this label alongside those who would refuse it, such as Tanaka.

From 1978, most of these performances were met with a high degree of media coverage, reported on by both the national daily press⁵ and specialized dance journalists,⁶ as well as being broadcast on the country's major television network.⁷ These first performances were equally met with public acclaim. Photographs from that time capture packed houses,⁸ with an enthusiasm reflected equally in the press coverage of the time: "Word of mouth moves quickly in Paris. We literally cram into the small theater of the *Nouveau Carré* where the Japanese are performing" (Dupuis 1978, 200).

Widespread impact

In a matter of a few years, particularly from 1978 to 1985, a number of butoh artists were invited to France, allowing French audiences to discover butoh's aesthetic diversity, ranging from the intimate performances of Iwana Masaki, Koseki Sumako, or Uesugi Mitsuyo, to the grandiloquent spectacles of Dairakudakan or Byakko-sha. Amongst these invited artists, some passed totally unnoticed, or their work was not categorized as butoh, such as Miura Isso's company Butoh-sha (with lead dancer Koseki Sumako), active in France from 1977. Thus a history of butoh in France takes shape that highlights certain artists while forgetting others, the latter either because they created stronger links to other countries, such as Ishii Mitsutaka or Kasai in Germany, or Eiko & Koma in the United States, or simply because some artists passed unnoticed.⁹

Thereafter, butoh performances increased, thanks to regular domestic touring opportunities in numerous French cities and the development of two networks: an institutional network that supported companies such as Sankai Juku¹⁰ and Ariadone,¹¹ and a vibrant underground network which resulted in regular invitations to artists like Tanaka, and gave rise to the permanent residence of Iwana in rural Normandy.

Ripe opportunities

One cannot underestimate how butoh's reception was favorable to the construction of the butoh phenomenon that encompasses media, aesthetics, and intellectual discourse. Butoh's arrival in France from the late 1970s in fact coincided with a period of French fascination with and curiosity about Japan, as much for its films (Ozu Yasujiro, Mizoguchi Kenji) and literature (Mishima Yukio, Kawabata Yasunari) as for Zen Buddhism (Eco 2003). The 1970 publication of Roland Barthes' *L'Empire des signes* (Empire of Signs) was significant to this newfound interest in Japan. From the earliest stages of its debut in France, butoh did not escape the notice of curious intellectuals. Without a doubt, the intelligentsia's attention to butoh contributed to its swift recognition.

The prestige of the French venues and festivals initially willing to present butoh also legitimized it within a radically shifting artistic landscape. The *Festival d'Automne* and the Nancy Festival tried to open the French performing arts scene and its audiences to international avant-garde acts by curating physical theatre companies from the United States, Asia, and Latin America. By being presented at these major multidisciplinary festivals, butoh benefited from a French receptiveness to the avant-garde and to the wider world. The theatre and visual arts worlds quickly joined in in welcoming butoh. Above all, though, it was the dance field – under major reconstruction and development at the time – that was to thereafter become butoh's biggest supporter. Butoh arrived right at a critical juncture in the development of contemporary dance, and at a high point in the public visibility of contemporary dance (Filloux-Vigreux 2001; Germain-Thomas 2009). New venues entirely dedicated to contemporary dance appeared at the turn of the late 1970s into the

1980s, and were swift to present butoh programs.¹² Modern and contemporary dance criticism, equally in full bloom at the time, was eager to follow these initial butoh performances in France.¹³

Aesthetic shockwaves

Butoh's arrival provoked a true aesthetic shock to choreographic practices, which until then had been dominated by ballet, neoclassical dance, and the notable, ubiquitous presence of Maurice Béjart. But it also created shockwaves in the contemporary dance world, which leaned more towards the North American abstractions of Alwin Nikolais and Merce Cunningham.¹⁴ (Pagès 2009a). Butoh came across as new and radical within the existing aesthetic context, with recognizable characteristics such as the color white, slowness, and nudity, which thwarted erotic anticipation, epitomized by Ikeda flagrantly emphasizing her exposed breasts while wearing a pair of horseshoes as a bra in *Le Dernier Éden*. Slow movement performed in close proximity between performer and audience further accentuated the nudity, revealing every inch of the body. Above all, however, butoh proved to be most subversive in its processes of generating movement, its presence on stage, and its use of gravity. By assuming the fetal position and squatting close to the ground, butoh collapsed (the typical body) carriage and lowered the dancer's physical center of gravity, rejecting a postural control which dominated movement patterns of the time. Many butoh works demonstrated an unstable verticality and a fragile posture, as opposed to the triumphant, athletic bodies in Béjart's choreography or the erect bodies of Cunningham's dancers. Muddling the lines and form of the dancing body, butoh could not be further from Western classical and contemporary corporeality. Whereas the French choreographic world remained dominated by "beautiful" skintight costumes and unitards showing the lines of the body, the legibility of the butoh dancer's body was broken-up by rags, scraps of clothing, or makeup and detritus applied to the skin. The clarity of the body's lines broke especially in how hands and feet were used, contradicting predominant usage in ballet or contemporary dance on French stages in the late 1970s.

Butoh treated the body in its totality, inclusive of the extremities of the feet, hands, and face, all of which became visual focal points. The feet were often flexed, tensed, or curled as much as possible, never pointed nor aligned to an extended leg. The hands, often hooked, at times clawed or feline, were neither the large, open, extended hand with spread fingers frequently used by neoclassical choreographers, nor the contemporary dancer's outstretched hand as simple extension of the arm.

Finally, the legibility of the body was disturbed by the nature of the corporeal approaches proposed by the projects undertaken in butoh. Despite butoh's diversity of approaches, there was a common predominant emphasis on sensorial work and the applying of imagery as choreographic motor, rather than a concern for delineating a body's lines in space. Like Georges Bataille's concept of *l'informe* (Bataille 1987), this process of metamorphosis would ultimately shatter traditional binary categories – human/animal, man/woman, young/old – thus upsetting ways of understanding and perceiving the world, and unsettling form as much as troubling gender.

Fascination and misinterpretations: the construction of a butoh "brand"

Waxing poetic while misunderstanding culture and history

As a consequence of their fascination, French critics invented a poetic discourse, often metaphorical, but bereft of precise sources. Carried away by a longtime fascination with and ignorance of Japan – harkening back to the *Japonisme* of the 1860s (Wilkinson 1992) – French written

discourse on butoh lacked historical references, resulting in numerous misinterpretations. Butoh was perceived within a context of misunderstanding the language and the Japanese avant-garde¹⁵ in two different ways: by an association with Hiroshima (De Vos 2006a; Pagès 2009c) and through a lens of exotification (Pagès 2011).

The strongest association, but also the most problematic, was the one which linked butoh to the atomic bombings in Japan. The recurring trope of butoh as a “dance born from Hiroshima’s ashes” was ubiquitous and formulaic in French journalism, implying that the nuclear tragedy was the catalyst for the apocalyptic style of this “dance of darkness.” Even if butoh’s emergence was indeed a product of post-war Japan’s massive socio-cultural upheavals, linking it to the atomic bombings is rather tenuous and obscure. Butoh cannot be merely reduced to a representation of nuclear tragedy. Far from wanting to represent mass carnage, Hijikata Tatsumi’s research addressed the morbid and the macabre within the dancer herself. With whitened, spectral, and deformed bodies, butoh triggered an interpretative slippage from *macabre* to *massacre*, constituting a memorial site for the contorted, complex memory of the atomic bombings in Japan.¹⁶

This stereotype contributed to locking butoh into an intransigent Japanese otherness. According to French critical discourse, only Japanese bodies damaged by atomic horrors could ever claim to embody such a dance. In attempting to solidify their view of the art form as having a[n essential] Japanese identity, critical discourse ran the gamut of Western depictions of a diametrically opposed Japan: strange, foreign, “oriental.” In a word: Other. Consequently, butoh’s success in France cannot be explained without this exotic interpretation, a blend of fascination and misunderstanding portraying this dance as some type of radical alterity. Through their repetitive and stagnant nature, critical platitudes formed a discursive envelope that obscures, extends, and reinvents the oeuvre and practices of butoh.

Butoh reinvented

Several phenomena contributed to the construction of a butoh cut off from its history: concurrent programming of artists from different generations, a lack of knowledge of Japanese art history and language, and ultimately, an exotic, ahistorical portrayal of butoh that was just as ignorant of its founders’ ties to Tokyo’s 1960s avant-garde as it was of their modern dance training.¹⁷

Without historical depth, butoh fell prey to reinvention. For example, critical discourse was almost exclusively focused on Ohno, omitting for a long time the figure and role of Hijikata. Due to his seniority among butoh dancers at the time, and significantly having danced on French stages unlike Hijikata, Ohno was considered in the eyes of the critics the true butoh master, and became a legendary figure (Pagès 2009b, 12–14).

The favored aesthetics of Sankai Juku

Despite butoh’s aesthetic diversity – from Tanaka’s performances to Ohno’s cross-dressing, from Dairakudakan’s kitsch grotesquerie to Sankai Juku’s sophistication – an image of butoh formed and ossified around several stereotypes: skin painted white, shaved heads, contorted faces, tormented bodies, slow movement, etc. Regularly performing in Paris and touring extensively throughout France, Sankai Juku’s overexposure contributed to this construction of reductive codes. Their whitened bodies, often slowly evolving amidst spectacular set designs, fed exotic perceptions of this strange, mystical, and evocative dance seen as some sort of ceremony or ritual. However, it was as much the prism of Hiroshima, and the interpretive shift from macabre to massacre which ultimately favored works portraying tormented bodies. Other butoh aesthetics

were less well-received; the outlandish works of Dairakudakan rarely circulated in France prior to the aughts,¹⁸ and the frenetic dances of Akira Kasai were only recently recognized.

If this clichéd image of butoh had an impact on presenters' choices and on critical and public reception, it seemed equally to have had an impact on the practices themselves. One of the key traits of how butoh was received in France is that critical discourse and choreographic practice are inseparable. Butoh progressively insinuated itself into the French choreographic landscape via the increase of both Japanese and non-Japanese artists in France identifying their work as butoh. As performance opportunities increased, though, the aesthetics of butoh congealed and became standardized. Indicators such as nudity or slow movement became reproduced "codes," often unquestioned and at times not even necessary to the process of experimentation or choreography.

Fruitful misunderstandings: butoh's establishment and new directions

Butoh's impact on dance in France: a detour for expressionism

All these misunderstandings nevertheless proved to be productive, stirring up strong interest in butoh amongst contemporary dancers working in France. The first sign of this interest was French dancers travelling to Japan to "go to the source," training directly with a master. Ohno had the strongest draw, with pioneer trips by choreographers Catherine Diverrès and Bernardo Montet in 1983, followed subsequently by numerous others.¹⁹ Travel to Japan thus became antithetical to what was then considered the formative journey of an entire generation of *la jeune danse française*²⁰ from the 1970s and 1980s: pilgrimage to New York.²¹ Traveling to Tokyo to study butoh offered an aesthetic alternative within a French choreographic context dominated by classical dance and American abstraction.

The butoh welcomed in France was uprooted and cut off from its historical link to German modern dancers; similarly French contemporary dance largely obscured its own origins as it emerged into full bloom.²² These origins were profoundly impacted by the work of German dancers including Mary Wigman and Jean Weidt. The exotic framing of butoh positioned it as something radically different from contemporary dance,²³ thus obscuring common movements and shared histories. A fascination for faraway places muddled the fact that French modern dancers and butoh dancers actually shared common methods to generate movement, performative states which I shall call "expressionist movement." Butoh and Japan thus constituted a roundabout opportunity to reintroduce and make visible the close, but obscured connection between contemporary French dance and expressionist movement (Pagès 2010).

Why then would one would have traveled all the way to Japan to search for a way of dancing and a dance legacy which was still living and active in France? Modern dancers suffered from a double invisibility: on the one hand they were eclipsed by the dominant American aesthetics, on the other hand they were part of a German expressionist aesthetic that was expunged as a result of painful wartime memories. The prevalent myth of the self-taught dancer contributed further to this erasure in a choreographic field in its prime. In forming *la jeune danse* many dancers in effect claimed a sort of *tabula rasa* and hence contributed to the myth of the "explosion of French contemporary dance." Butoh's arrival and its reception in France thus found itself at the intersection of two historiographic myths: that of the "explosion of French contemporary dance," along with its refusal of an expressionist-influenced modern dance; and that of a reconstructed history of butoh, by way of the fantasy of Hiroshima and exotic perceptions, that cuts off butoh's strong ties to the Japanese disciples of Mary Wigman. The erasure of German expressionist aesthetic therefore plays a crucial role in how butoh was received during this artistic period.

A new appetite for *butoh*

French interest in *butoh* nonetheless has persisted since its arrival, lasting for almost forty years. Programming and critical enthusiasm have not waned, nor has the curiosity of contemporary dancers. With many Japanese dancers settling in France, *butoh* has progressively established itself as a regular resource for dancers. Significantly, it has worked its way into higher dance education in institutions including the *Conservatoire national supérieur de Lyon* (National Conservatory of Music and Dance in Lyon, CNSMDL) and the *Centre national de danse contemporaine d'Angers* (National Center of Contemporary Dance, CNDC), the latter notably under the directorship of Emmanuelle Huynh,²⁴ who was responsible for bringing Murobushi, Kasai, and Tanaka to teach there. Huynh contributed equally to the French recognition of Kasai, who was little known in France prior to *Spiel*, their 2012 performance collaboration in Angers.

This enduring fascination for *butoh* has since the aughts taken new directions through reconsideration of its avant-garde aspects. In this way, Hijikata has been rediscovered as the founder of *butoh*, along with his performance work and his involvement with the Tokyo avant-garde of the 1960s.²⁵ This new fascination operates through citation and appropriation by contemporary dancers who have never practiced *butoh*.²⁶

This new interest in *butoh* emerged as part of a broader trend in French contemporary dance in the first two decades of the 21st century to rediscover and reconstruct American avant-garde works from the 1960s by claiming the influence of postmodern dance and Judson Church (Ginot 2003; Perrin 2012), by questioning representation, by generating anti-spectacles, and by becoming interested in improvisation scores. If Ohno's *butoh* offered an alternative to American choreographic models in the early 1980s, Hijikata's *butoh* and his ties to 1960s avant-garde artists offers rich new references and a new examination of otherness as a means to galvanize today's creative processes.

To this day *butoh* remains a reference for an entirely new generation of choreographers, some who have studied at the CNDC, such as Beryl Breuil, others trained by Zaitso such as Laurence Pagès and Bleuène Madeleine, or, like Camille Mutel, trained by Iwana. From classes at the CNDC to regular training over the past fifteen years by the likes of Iwana and Zaitso, *butoh*'s establishment has always and inevitably fed the process of contemporary artists in France. One can observe familiar elements in improvisation methods widely practiced in today's dance education, or in somatic practices which explore intensely minute perception, developing knowledge through feeling to intensify movement. Yet again, *butoh* and contemporary performance seem to intersect in their common methods and concerns.

In France *butoh* seems to function as a foundation, an ever-present reference, and an ongoing practice. Even if *butoh* performance and practice in France has often been determined by codes under the weight of its success, it nevertheless remains an active reference and destabilizing resource for contemporary dance in fertile turmoil. Examining *butoh*'s arrival on French soil encourages the development of a transnational dance history of cultural transfers, allowing in effect an analysis of how *butoh* was "invented" and constructed by the French gaze, as much as it allows historiographic re-examination of *la nouvelle danse française*. This meeting point thus demonstrates a necessity to intersect dance history with cultural history in order to grasp the migratory complexities of movement.

Notes

- 1 Le Carré Silvia Monfort and the Festival d'Automne in Paris.
- 2 Ashikawa performed in Hijikata Tatsumi's *Yami no mairime jū ni tai* (*The Twelve Stages of the Terpsichore of Darkness*). Tanaka performed his solo *Drive*.

- 3 *Ma, espace-temps du Japon* at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, October 11 through December 11, 1978, as part of the Festival d'Automne.
- 4 Guattari would notably invite Tanaka to dance at La Borde psychiatric clinic in 1986. This performance was filmed by Joséphine Guattari and François Pain in *Min Tanaka: danseur du butō* (Salvatierra 2008).
- 5 An article about *The Last Eden* appeared in the newspaper *Le Monde* on January 27, 1978. The newspaper *Libération* featured a full page on the work on February 3, 1978.
- 6 Coverage in publications including *Les Saisons de la danse*, *Pour la danse*, *Art Press*, etc.
- 7 *La danseuse japonaise*, a story broadcast on TF1's news, October 19, 1978. Duration: 3:15. Archived at INA (*Institut national de l'audiovisuel*).
- 8 Particularly a number of photographs taken by critic Jean-Marie Gourreau. Archived at the media library of the *Centre national de la danse*, Pantin.
- 9 Artists including Saï, Ushiyama Hiro, Yamada Setsuko, Kunishi Kamiryo, and Eji Ikuyo are some of those forgotten from this period. Their names appear only in performance calendars or program notes.
- 10 From 1982 until the time of this publication, Sankai Juku has been commissioned by the *Théâtre de la Ville* in Paris to make a new work every other year.
- 11 Carlotta Ikeda based herself in Bordeaux. Murobushi Ko made numerous round trips between France and Japan.
- 12 These venues included the Montpellier Dance Festival, *Théâtre de la Ville* in Paris, *Maison de la danse de Lyon*, etc.
- 13 Through the 1970s, specialized journals including *Les Saisons de la danse* and *Pour la danse* were receptive to modern dance. The theoretical journal *Empreintes* was founded in 1977. Critics such as Marcelle Michel and Lise Brunel championed contemporary dance in the national daily press, working towards its mainstream recognition.
- 14 Nikolais and Carolyn Carlson achieved visibility and recognition in 1968 during their respective French premieres at the Paris International Festival of Dance. Carlson became the official *Etoile-chorégraphe* (prima ballerina-choreographer) of the Paris Opera in 1974. Nikolais was appointed in 1978 to direct the *Centre national de danse contemporaine* in Angers, France's first educational institution of contemporary dance (Mayen 2012).
- 15 Japan Studies in France significantly developed from the seventies onward. The exhibition *Japon des Avant-gardes* occurred in Paris in 1985–1986.
- 16 France has remained particularly silent in not commemorating the events of Hiroshima. When public reference to Hiroshima appeared in 1959 more prominently in Alain Resnais' and Marguerite Duras' film *Hiroshima mon amour*, it is a fragmentary memory, primarily visual and sensorial, crafted from creative license. This memory then reared its head in the late 1970s through the body of the butoh dancer, perceived as the Japanese body of a suffering atomic victim.
- 17 Editor's note: This may also have included an ignorance of French influences on butoh, such as Genet, Artaud, etc.
- 18 Maro Akaji was only invited intermittently to France, in 1982 and 1997, and in 1987 as the choreographer for the solo *Chiisako* danced by Carlotta Ikeda. He would have to wait until 2007 when, due to the efforts of *la Maison de la culture du Japon*, the company began to present its work regularly in Paris.
- 19 Including Pierre Doussaint, Isabelle Dubouloz, Santiago Sempere, Sidonie Rochon, etc.
- 20 Editor's note: Literally "young French dance," this is an alternative term for *Nouvelle danse française* (new French dance), born in the late 1970s as young French choreographers came in contact with American and German forms of modern and contemporary dance.
- 21 Including Dominique Boivin, Kilina Cremona, Jean-Claude Gallotta, Jacques Garnier, Mathilde Monnier, Hervé Robbe, Karine Saporta, etc. (Mayen 2012; Dardy-Cretin 2007, 221–232).
- 22 For example, including dancers Françoise et Dominique Dupuy, Jacqueline Robinson, Jerome Andrews, Karin Waehner, etc. (Robinson 1990).
- 23 Butoh's reception in France plays a part in the long history of exotification of dances which come from abroad, as researched by Anne Décoret. Décoret emphasizes how much the etymology of the word *exotic* signifies what is foreign to, outside of, or external to – *exo* in Greek – the Western world and, by extension, outside of "Western dance" (Décoret-Ahiha 2004).
- 24 From 2004 until 2012.
- 25 Hijikata's body of work, inclusive of his writing, have been introduced by researchers Patrick De Vos and Odette Aslan (2002), and by film screenings by the *Vidéodanse* festival at the *Centre Pompidou* and the *Cinémaèque de la danse*.
- 26 *Visitations* (2005) by Julia Cima proposes a series of solos from dance history's legends – Isadora Duncan, Maurice Béjart, Dominique Bagouet, Merce Cunningham, Vaslav Nijinsky – and opens with a

reprinted excerpt of Hijikata's solo *Hosotan. La Danseuse malade* (2008), by Boris Charmatz, uses texts from Hijikata. The choreographer Xavier Le Roy in *Product of Other Circumstances* (2009) explains on stage his process of trying to become a butoh dancer within two hours. In presenting his collection of material, and through ordinary methods including online searches, reading of works, or the imitation of a dance, he returns, through the pretext of butoh, to questions he asks in his other pieces about an artist's work and working conditions.

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