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SU-EN BUTOH COMPANY – BODY, NATURE, AND THE WORLD

SU-EN

Butoh – the dance of life and death.
Vibrant, creative, uncompromising, brutal.
The flesh dissolves.
Dirt shines.
Space cracks.
Time laughs.

Japan, 1988

SU-EN Butoh Company's journey started with the encounter of a performance by Tomoe Shizune & Hakutobo¹ of *Nyushoku no onna* (Milky Woman), at Jean Jean Theatre, Shibuya. The stage was lit by all shades of life, connecting performers and audience in Ashikawa Yoko's² choreography and direction and music by Tomoe Shizune.³ It was another world, a universe of aesthetics that gave bodies and movement meaning. This was butoh. Ashikawa's workshop at Terpsichore, Nakano, was electric, the air quietly buzzing. Ashikawa spoke about the reality of the performing body. Her presence transformed the space. Some Hakutobo dancers assisted her, and there was a symbiosis, a united body. The same night, the young dancer that would become SU-EN became a founding member of the student performing group Gnome,⁴ a butoh student of Ashikawa, and an apprentice of Tomoe. These fierce dancers held the challenge of a life-time.

***Kaze no Cho* (Butterfly of the Wind)**

Japan, 1988–1993

Daily confrontations with butoh involved training, choreography, and practical work around productions. Confrontations with time and space produced the painful realization that our bodies do not belong to us when we train and perform.⁵ Individual artistic visions are hostage to the body's limitations. The learning begins – to create costumes, to make props, to help in producing stage sets, to understand lighting designs, and most importantly of all, to take on the humble task of cleaning floors. This is a dangerous world, far from all other performing arts. The teacher is loved and feared; the teacher demands all and everything. In a whirlwind of preparations, and with an

intensity of purpose, there were regular stage productions with Gnome and some Hakutobo performances: always some new choreography to remember and new parts to dance. The exposure to the immense array of Japanese performing arts was constant: traditional and contemporary dance, theatre, and butoh companies. The Izumo Yoh school of Jiuta-mai, a dance form from 17th century Japan, beckoned in 1991 and culminated in the professional stage performing *nattori* level⁶ in 1995. There were burlesque shows at night clubs with other Hakutobo dancers; a direct and ruthless stage experience as half naked bodies were viewed with hungry eyes.

Tokyo, 1992

SU-EN Butoh Company made its formal debut in *Kaze no Cho* (Butterfly of the Wind),⁷ choreographed by Ashikawa, directed by Tomoe, and produced by Tomoe Shizune & Hakutobo, who bestowed the stage name SU-EN. This was an honor that involves a major commitment: to love, challenge, and develop the butoh method of the Hakutobo lineage. Perched on the edge of survival, the body now had a profound meaning to offer the world. The teacher's unflinching discipline, borderless energy, knowledge, and creativity sculpted a butoh dancer. This was the point of no return.

Encountering realities

Sweden, 1994

SU-EN Butoh Company moved to Scandinavia to establish butoh in Northern Europe as a contemporary dance form. This demanded a fierce artistic drive, unflinching commitment, and intense struggle. The struggle continues. As one of the first non-Japanese companies, SU-EN Butoh Company plays a crucial part in developing butoh in the world. The company spans a wide spectrum of activities including solo performances, ensemble choreography, workshops, crossover art projects, dance films, community art projects, art exhibitions, seminars, and publications, as well as the curating of international dance and art events. Experimenting with new meetings with audiences includes projects such as knocking on a stranger's doors to be invited in for indoor performances, as well as using public space as a creative venue for site-specific work.

National and international funding grants provide SU-EN Butoh Company with the opportunities to develop work from a long-term, professional perspective. International artists, lighting designers, and composers contribute to the productions in a universe that vibrates with sound, music, costumes, stage art, color, texture, and smells. Here the strong, mainly female bodies in the company's works challenge the shape and definition of the body.

Early works for stage were significant ensemble pieces and remained close to the Hakutobo-style butoh aesthetics.⁸ The development of SU-EN Butoh Company evolved largely through site-specific encounters and creations. Ashikawa's instructions, "Be near the real thing," guided this process. The SU-EN Butoh Materials for the body, originating from something that exists in the physical reality around us, were applied directly in the creative process. Two vital encounters with the outward environment were with a metal scrapyard and a particle research center.

Scrap Bodies (1998): This solo premiered inside a building at a metal scrapyard.

From the program notes of *Scrap Bodies*:⁹

Stillborn beauty germinates from twisted metal, mountains of unwanted car engines,
barrels of magnesium spiral cut-offs.

This graveyard of matter gives birth to a choreography of infinity.

What does it mean to be a human?

The collaboration with Uppsala Scrapyard AB continues. The encounter with this space: the recycling, the large mechanical cranes, the bulldozers all reflect our human relationship to civilization. This project has produced still photos, the dance video *Scrap Life* (2006), and many live events, where the dancers performed with trucks and scrap metal workers.

The solo *Atomic* (1999) and later the ensemble project *Atomic Event* (2000, 2001) researched atoms and particle physics. Ashikawa's teachings "Searching for the smallest unit of the body" initiated this process. *Atomic Event* was presented inside the cyclotron room at the particle research center the Svedberg Laboratory in Uppsala, with a researcher joining the dancers, video artist, and musician.

The encounter with the physical world and its realities and the inherent struggles that emanate from this process become the working tools that create the choreography. The Body Materials¹⁰ at the core of the SU-EN Butoh Method¹¹ emerge from this struggle with reality, and are documented in publications about the company (SU-EN and Kennedy 2003, SU-EN 2012).

Encountering nature

Sweden, 1997

SU-EN Butoh Company built an artistic center to guarantee creative freedom to build the repertoire. All the company's activities were moved to Haglund Skola in a forest landscape. An old village school and surrounding buildings were changed into a sanctuary for the study and expression of the body and art in butoh. This butoh center encompasses all requirements for stage production: the dance studio, accommodation, office, the costume atelier and stock rooms for scenography, the library of texts and other materials on butoh and other performing arts, guest houses, and tool sheds. The life-style of the company values practical chores as well as training, and full immersion in the artistic process and in nature is vital to embody butoh and to create work for the stage. We hear nature speaking directly in the choreographies.

Fragrant (2005): This highly visual, multi-media work evolves from forbidden knowledge in an aesthetic of delicate and lush flower art. Seven dancers in hand-painted costumes in blues,



Figure 30.1 Poster photo for *Fragrant* (2005), photograph by Henriette Lykke. Courtesy of SU-EN Butoh Company and Henriette Lykke.

pinks, and purples are flowers that lure insects to them. More classical butoh aesthetics meet raw Swedish nature and the botanical world.

Luscious (2009): This production celebrates life. It is performed on a large stage for a more diverse dance audience. Luscious nature, sharp with dangers, sets the tone. The hand-painted backdrop changes through the light from a stormy sky to a calm green forest. A voice artist and ten dancers perform with two tons of earth, water dripping from the sky into growing plants.

Soot (2013): This solo moves from the previous lush performances into a sparse, harsh reduction of line. It merges a more classical style of butoh with a political perspective of the body as a vessel for activism. This fragile choreography and dance is a fierce criticism of society and how human beings disrupt nature's balance.

From the program notes of *Soot*:

In a space of incompleteness
 She senses her way
 Following the fragrance of powdery black
 Softly licking a barely visible wound
 Listening through fingertips
 Skin ripped, healing with an itch
 What remains when pain leaves?
 When civilisation falls asleep?
 Bodies shimmering
 Embracing the world

The forest, where trees, rocks, stones, plants, insects, and animals all create a society and civilization of their own, provides a major influence in the choreographic language and working method of the SU-EN Butoh Company. Every day is an interaction, a struggle with the forces of nature, other living beings, climate, and seasons. This struggle creates a passionate relationship between the body and the world.

SU-EN Butoh Method and Body Materials

Ashikawa's and Tomoe's method started a long-term exploration in response to the freedom of working in the company's studio and headquarters. The SU-EN Butoh Method creates a dancing and performing body, through the training of Body Materials. The Body Materials constitute the basis for the training and the choreography, providing a resistance to the body. There is a struggle, and there is no final solution. Being mainly organic inspiration from nature, each material has a specific tension, quality, texture, and speed. The rotting process, dark particles, electric lightning, cold, hot, stone, mud, and slime are already known to our bodies. These different realities have their own logic and rules. The choreography and dance are based on these "new" realities. The body becomes this reality.

The complex method comprises around 60 such materials. Some Body Materials are a direct development from Ashikawa's teachings of Hijikata's butoh-fu,¹² some are stylized and adapted, some are new creations. The students of SU-EN Butoh Method also perform several demanding phrases and choreographies based on the Body Materials, as well as exploring and challenging them through butoh improvisation. The Body Material's "rotten process" is one of SU-EN Butoh Company's original Body Materials:

rotten process
 autumn

bacteria fool around in drifts of leaves
rot spreads inside the intestines
stomach, lungs
rotten air treks up the windpipe
the soft skin inside the lips rot

rotting air permeates the air outside, bad breath
the bad breath of autumn

a giant mouth gapes behind the body
bad breath blows through the space, initiating the transportation

To study as an apprentice is the very foundation of the SU-EN Butoh Method. Body to body: Teacher to student. The company offers camps and workshops to participants from all over the world, although a life of workshops is never enough to train to be a dancer. The SU-EN Butoh Method requires approximately five years of focused training with the company as an apprentice; it offers a path for high-level training of butoh that connects the roots with a development into the future.¹³

The SU-EN “Butoh Body” in time and space

The butoh dancer’s aim is to reach the quality of the Butoh Body.¹⁴ The Butoh Body is the intention and existence of the dancer as the body performs on stage. The Butoh Body is a living body. It does not exist without the other bodies, does not breathe without the space surrounding it. It cannot dance without the realities and tension of life and death.

Butoh time is infinity in a moment. Every second is condensed with an explosion. Time is sliced, again and again. Time has already passed: it is present and it is future. The Butoh Body exists in between all of this.

Butoh space is what is far away and far away inside. It is in the in-between, in the cracks of the walls and floor. It is in the distance, in the soft sound of wind in the tree tops. It is found in the moment of surprise. It is the world behind.

The Butoh Body comes alive when time and space are one.

The physicality of being

Going deeper into the Butoh Body, there is a point where the pure physicality of being starts to emerge. The performances develop from a very personal and physical experience of life.

Headless (2001): Bones and skin are the costume. Pain and gravity are the choreography. It is an intense personal experience and story, yet strong enough to become artistic material that reaches beyond the individual.

From the program notes of *Headless*:

a head that is looking for a body
a body that is looking for a head
love which is looking for pain
pain which is looking for love
this is the land in between, the Bardo¹⁵
this is the space where the bones are exposed to
self-cannibalism and beauty at the same time

where the biting into the flesh
 is an act of love
 an act of life

Slice (2003): in this solo, the body is already part of death. It is developed in Performance Art contexts, using real fish guts on stage, with the final stage version incorporating an art video showing the body immersed in fish guts. In the space, a large shark hook dangles.

From the program notes of *Slice*:

die whilst alive, dissection of the flesh
 visceral desire commands and imprisons
 an incision, one more
 the shape dissolves

hanging
 breathing from the shoulder and downwards
 the dance of the ribs
 the true face

devoured to the bone
 a naked soldier, a slave of dissolving
 unity and separation
 dis-incarnation and secret fantasies

flying
 the insect is crushed by the light
 an incision, one more
 a visceral walk

Chicken Life (2003) / *The Chicken Project* (2003–2004): This extended project places the human body in direct relationship to the life of a chicken. It investigates human and animal relationships, both in a philosophical and political way. The video is filmed inside a chicken coop, and the stage version is performed in a chicken house set. The participants sign a contract to react only as chickens once they step into the set.

Madness, beauty, and decay

SU-EN Butoh Company, now an established international dance company, retains the foundation of all its work in the very first question that Ashikawa put to her students in training: “What is the body?” The choreography in each new production investigates a new theme of physicality. It evolves from the theme but can never exist without the studio, where rigorous training challenges the bodies to be able to perform the aesthetics. SU-EN Butoh Company dancers meet the battle for each new performance.

Cracks (2008): The colorful ensemble choreography plays with classical butoh and burlesque conventions. Five dancers appear as enigmas of the desert, the harsh space abundant with watermelons. Its solo choreography *Scratch dance* ends with a cleansing ritual using saliva. The lighting design transforms this production into living visual art.

Blush (2010): This is a love story between butoh and action painting. Four dancers use their bodies to paint and splash in gold powder, with flower petals and rotten plums added as vibrant



Figure 30.2 From SU-EN Butoh Company production *Blush* (2010), photograph by Gunnar H Stening. Courtesy of SU-EN Butoh Company and Gunnar H Stening.

materials. Surprising elements include influences from Bellmer's artwork, Renaissance painting, and glamorous and vulgar burlesque make-up.

Rapture (2011): Performed on a large stage, this work uses the poisonous bite of the tarantula spider to initiate a desperate momentum for dancing. Nine dancers perform with twisted and rattling limbs in a stage set made of straw, as in a field during harvest time. The madness is embodied in a solo of dancing to exhaustion as screams of despair penetrate the theatre.

Voracious (2015): This art video and dance performance creates the smell and texture of a stage set of decaying apples, which is very tangible to the audience. Five dancers in hand-painted gowns in shades of black, red, and brown are fixed in a cycle of eating and being eaten. The voice of hunger and desire echoes from inside the body. Cracked breathing and suffocated screams fill the space.

From the program notes of *Voracious*:

Desiring the world
She never has enough
Devouring the world
She must have a taste
Devoured by the world
Who eats whom?
Becoming the hunger
Her body is the world

Crawling towards freedom

Butoh could never have been born anywhere else than in Japan. Its roots, founders, and creators need to be acknowledged and respected by future generations. Today, the world itself, how the body and culture are defined, is naturally not the same as it was during the creation of *ankoku*

butoh.¹⁶ What is understood as butoh in the Japanese context is changing. To reach its full potential and develop, butoh needs to exist in and interact with the contemporary world and society. The deep universal artistic and human reasons that connect a dancer with their audience through butoh are irrespective of cultural background. The most important element is the training with the teacher, and the devotion to the method as something larger than any individual artistic vision. SU-EN Butoh Company is an experiment, a bastard baby born of two cultures. This is a body between East and West, a sapling sown by the friction that kick-sparked *ankoku butoh* into existence. We need to break away from culture, become homeless dissidents in exile. We need to break from our own work when it becomes a burden of expectations. We need to create a new context. SU-EN Butoh Company is now a powerful youngster after quarter of a century on the international butoh stage.

Butoh is a human interaction with the world and creation. It is an act of resistance: resistance to taking life for granted. It is an action to celebrate each human and all life forms on this planet. A re-action to our small, greedy, human minds that so quickly forget the wonders of life. The Butoh Body will be a body of this resistance. The Butoh Body is a living body. Connecting time and space. Visiting past, present, and future.

Dirt shines. Space cracks. Time laughs.

I dedicate SU-EN Butoh Company's work to the human body, struggling for freedom, crawling towards equality and wonder. I would like to extend my gratitude to: my teachers of butoh, Ashikawa Yoko and Tomoe Shizune, who never gave up on me. The dancers of Tomoe Shizune & Hakutobo for giving such strong support throughout my training. My teacher of Jiuta-mai, Izumo Yoh for opening up new worlds of the Japanese performing arts. Butoh students that struggled through the training in the Body Materials. Butoh students that dared to perform in SU-EN Butoh Company productions. Composers, lighting designers, visual artists, photographers, performance artists, and musicians that contributed to SU-EN Butoh Company's artistic work. Butoh spectators all over the world. Special thanks to Gilles Kennedy, Richard Hart, Miyagawa Rieko, Rosula Blanc, Seki Yumiko, and Seisaku.

Notes

- 1 Tomoe Shizune & Hakutobo: Japanese butoh company in the lineage of Hijikata Tatsumi.
- 2 Ashikawa Yoko: major performer of butoh, choreographic assistant to Hijikata Tatsumi, the founder of butoh.
- 3 Tomoe Shizune: originally a composer and musician, the artistic director of Hakutobo since the middle of the 1980s.
- 4 Gnome, Karada Troupe, Butoh Kukan: the student group changed names during the years. A Hakutobo dancer was always officially the director.
- 5 Training and apprenticeship period with Ashikawa and Tomoe 1988–1993. Regular performances in Gnome, Butoh Kukan, and Karada Troupe and some Tomoe Shizune & Hakutobo productions. SU-EN's notebooks from training, 1988–1993. Documented discussions in the Hakutobo studio regarding training, performance, the Butoh Body, and the development of the Tomoe Shizune method.
- 6 Nattori: a license that entitles a student to teach and perform a Japanese artistic tradition.
- 7 *Kaze no Cho* (Butterfly of the Wind) debuted in Tiny Alice, Shinjuku. A *hata-age kōen* (raising the flag) performance is when a dancer is presented to the world as part of the lineage and as an independent dancer. It was choreographed by Ashikawa, directed by Tomoe, produced by Tomoe Shizune & Hakutobo. This performance marks the debut of SU-EN Butoh Company and its place in the Butoh lineage of Ashikawa and Tomoe.
- 8 *Umu* (1994), *Charila* (1995), *Shadows in Bloom* (1996), and many more: *Charila* was initially a solo.
- 9 All program notes are from performances by SU-EN Butoh Company and are written by SU-EN.

- 10 SU-EN established the concept of ©SU-EN Body Materials in 1994 as the foundation of the ©SU-EN Butoh Method: and used this ever then in ©SU-EN Butoh Company productions.
- 11 The first ten years of ©SU-EN Butoh Company and the ©SU-EN Butoh Method are described in the book *Butoh: Body and the World* from 2003.
- 12 *Butoh-fu*: Hijikata's notational butoh. The dance follows set choreography and score, based on his method.
- 13 SU-EN Butoh Company has graduated two dancers; ©TO-EN in 2009 and ©KAI-EN in 2010. Their names show the continuation of the lineage from SU-EN's Butoh Body.
- 14 Butoh Body: Japanese word is *butoh-tai*, meaning the inside quality/condition and intention/existence of the body as it is placed on stage.
- 15 *Bardo*: the state of in between death and rebirth, in Tibetan Buddhism. The Tibetan Book of Death is *Bardo Thödol*.
- 16 *Ankoku butoh*: Hijikata's description of his choreography; generally translated as "dance of darkness," meaning what is unexplored and unknown to us.

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