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A Sun more Alive

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A SUN MORE ALIVE

Butoh in Mexico

Gustavo Emilio Rosales (translated by Jordan A. Y. Smith)

Desde el ocaso, un sol más vivo . . .
*(From sunset, a sun more alive . . .)*¹

– Sandoval y Zapata

Under Mexico's cultural prism, butoh expands its artistic density: in its aesthetic flow – in contact with the dimensions of paradox, magic, and everyday absurdities that largely constitute that entelechy we might term *the Mexican* – this contemporary form of dance integrates philosophical and poetic aspects that transform it into a great sensorial power, which survives, defiantly, the continual deaths of art in the post-apocalyptic ages. It is a sun of the sunset; a sun that faints, but which in the process of dying becomes all the more alive.

I

They are seen wandering, with expansive delight, through the unheard of places of Mexico City and numerous provinces of the Republic of Mexico. There too, as in other parts of the planet, they are called *butoh-ka*, and they are the heirs of a historically recent artistic tradition, but one that clearly serves as bearer of ancestral material. They may be born in various places around the country or may hail from diverse nations. They are students and teachers and teachers recognized as students of teachers with great seniority and great trajectory. They form a symbolic clan in which the hierarchy of those practitioners who participated in the foundational stage of the movement, alongside of Ōno and Hijikata, is recognized without dispute.

A brief retrospective will give an account of the intensity of circulation of protagonists and programs related to butoh dance in Mexico. In early April 2017, Espartaco Martínez gave a workshop and presented a work-in-progress, *La Bestia* (The Beast), at the forum La Bodega del Teatro San Pancho, in Nayarit; he participated in the Festival Cuerpos en Revuelta² in March 2016, organized by Eugenia Vargas and the Laboratorio Escénico Danza Teatro Ritual (Scenic Dance Laboratory Ritual Theater), in the Museo Universitario del Chopo (University Museum of Chopo) – an emblematic cultural space in Mexico City – along with Kumotaro Mukai, in an astonishing duet, titled *Ja yi me ma shi te*.³ The aforementioned festival was a remarkable accomplishment for the artistic weight of its guests and the transcendence of its performances



Figure 32.1 Yumiko Yoshioka, photograph by Gabriel Morales.

and academic activities. In addition to the *butoh-ka* mentioned, participants included Hiroko and Koichi Tamano (the legendary couple of mature performers, who offered their creation, *Aoi Hana, Blue Flower*), Yukio Suzuki (*Evanescere*) and Natalia Cuellar (*Xibalbá*) from Chile, along with Morishita Takashi, director of the Hijikata Archive, who gave a keynote lecture and produced the photography exhibition, *El butoh de Tatsumi Hijikata*. People from Germany, Chile, Colombia, and Argentina traveled to Mexico to be in *Cuerpos en Revuelta*. At the moment these lines were written, the deadline has just passed for the call to participate in *Butoh Variations, Experimental Scenic Platform*, a program that will be part of the activities of the second edition of *Cuerpos en Revuelta*, to be held from May 16 to June 2, 2017, and which will consist of the presentation of performances that in one way or another are assumed to be influenced by *butoh*, but which do not necessarily adhere entirely to the genre. The 2017 edition of the festival will feature special guests, Japanese teachers Atsushi Takenouchi (who will teach at the CDMX and a workshop-retreat in Huehucocoyotl, Morelos), Kawaguchi Takao (who will analyze the creative processes of Ohno Kazuo), Makiko Tominaga (*Introduction to Butoh*), and Kudo Taketeru (*The Force of the Primitive*), in addition to having the participation of the Mexican artist Lola Lince (*Perceptions of the Principles that Return*) and again Natalia Cuéllar (*Butoh: Body, Biography and Urban Memory*). With a vehemence seldom seen in cultural management, as though there were no tomorrow, and although the first edition of *Cuerpos en Revuelta* involved magnificent efforts, Eugenia Vargas and her Laboratorio Escénico Danza Teatro Ritual made possible presentations and workshops held in the Mexican capital in the last stretch of 2016 with the Japanese *butoh-ka* Yuko Kaseki, Kudo Taketeru, and Ishimoto Kae. Additionally, the collective Shakti ArtEscena S.C., under the direction of Adriana Portillo, organized in November workshops and presentations of the Japanese master residing in Finland, Ken Mai. In June, the Experimental Company of Lola Lince, based in the city of Guanajuato, organized a workshop and keynote lecture-demonstration by the legendary teacher Nakajima Natsu, who for decades has been working with high-profile Mexican dancers including their own Lola Lince and Isabel Beteta,

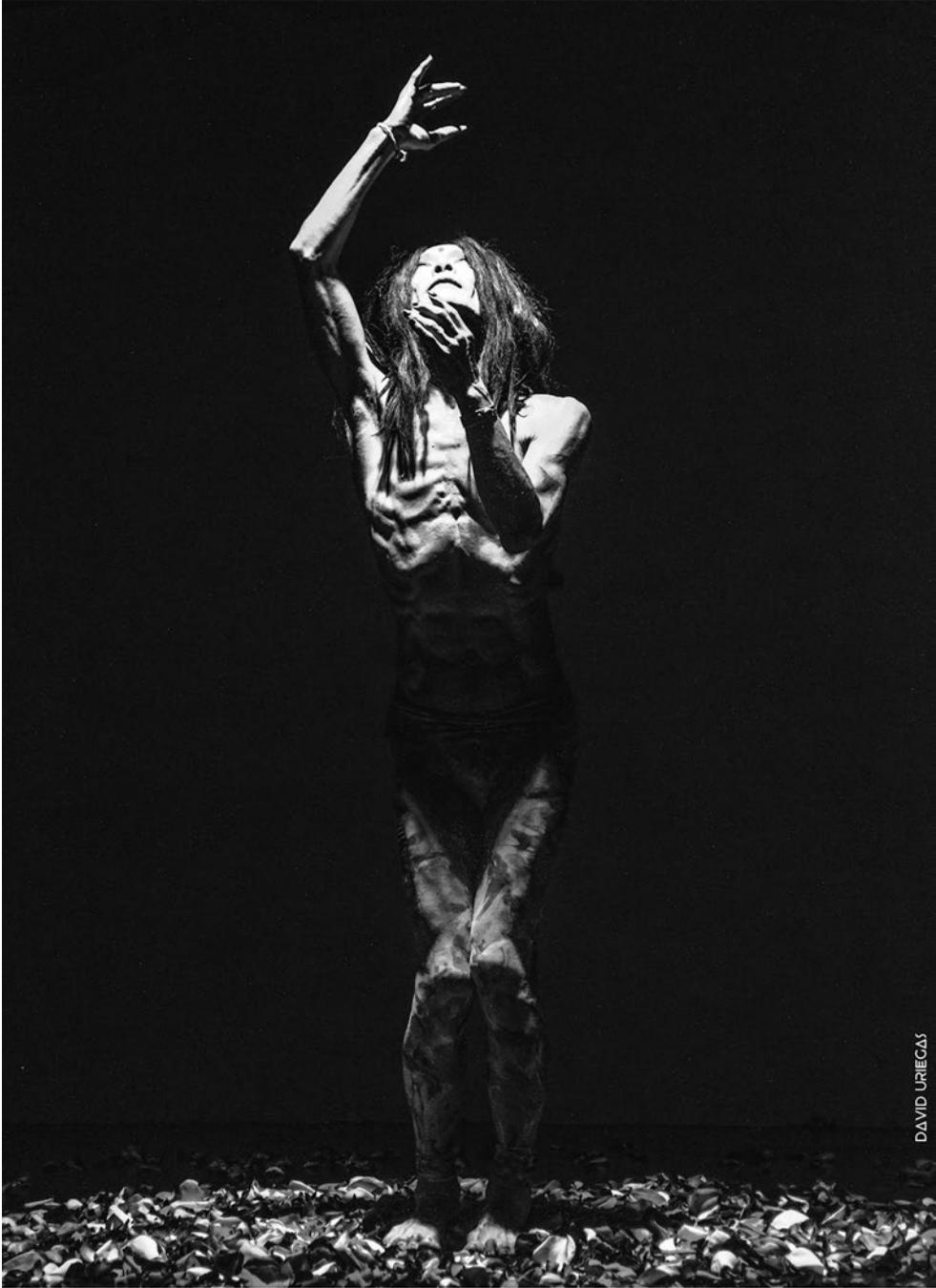


Figure 32.2 Ken Mai, photograph by David Uriegas.

with whom Nakajima created the beautiful solo dubbed *Tras la sombra de los pájaros* (*Behind the Shadow of Birds*).

Admittedly I have wound up with a paragraph so long, populated entirely with enumerations of what happened in Mexico with respect to butoh during only a scant few months. Yet I did not even exhaust the facts: other figures were at work, other programs were held simultaneously to those already mentioned. From this brief account, it is reasonable to consider that in Mexico butoh has encountered an expanded aesthetics, the creation of job opportunities, the circulation of knowledge, audiences, and analytical visions with respect to its cultural complexity.

I got to participate directly in one of these resonances, one particularly linked to the establishment of analytical visions related to butoh's cultural complexity. It consisted of an international encounter called *Raíces profundas de la danza* (Deep roots of dance), organized by Isabel Beteta and Katsura Kan in the Centro Cultural Los Talleres. The participants were Mexican and Japanese artists and theorists. In addition to participating as a speaker, I edited a special issue of the magazine I run (*DCO Dance, Body, Obsession*), which published the proceedings. Excerpts of the contents of this special edition might function collectively as a reflective *corpus* related to the diverse ways of thinking butoh today. It will be convenient to quote a few of these texts. Ishii Tatsuuro, dance critic and professor at Keio University, wrote:

I should mention that in Japan's situation today it is easier to belong to contemporary dance than to be a *butoh-ka*, since, even nowadays, Butoh hasn't gotten a strong rooting in the country and is still considered "underground." It is even considered a peripheral current in relation to the mainstream forms of dance. However, the body that was born from butoh has grown around the world. Its influence is so far reaching that the points of origin are difficult to trace.

Ishii 2015, 25

For her part, Inata Naomi, a researcher in philosophy and aesthetics who is a professor at Waseda University and author of the book *Hijikata Tatsumi zetsugo noshintai* (*Hijikata Tatsumi: Body Never to Be Seen Again*), stated, "Approaching butoh from a renewed perspective, capable of transcending the borders of time and genre, will contribute in the years to come to increasing the fecundity of this extraordinary discipline" (Inata 2015, 22). I conclude this survey of the commentary presented with a thought from specialist William Marotti, researcher and historian of contemporary Japanese arts at UCLA:

In its best instances, butoh as a critical performance means that it is especially well-suited to shining a critical light on the present in a both broad and site-specific manner. Butoh can engage the here and now in a manner with ramifications across multiple scales, from local to global, from broad to highly specific. As a paradoxically anti-formal form, whose critique goes beyond dance formalism to look at gesture, space, bodily comportment and habit, butoh can be remarkably flexible and multi-situational.

Marotti 2015, 52

We must recall that the critical practice around butoh that was carried out in the Centro Cultural Los Talleres – the most significant independent space for dance at the national level – in October 2014 (months before the corresponding edition of *DCO*), occurred in the context of a nation convulsed by internal violence resulting from what several analysts have termed "narcopolitics," that is, the business link between drug cartels and senior government officials in the administration of Enrique Peña Nieto, a president accused of alleged acts of corruption, who seized power



Figure 32.3 Isabel Beteta, photograph by Gabriel Morales.

under suspicion of electoral fraud and suspected conflict of interest with Televisa, the company that owns and retains absolute control over the regionally dominant television network.

II

Butoh never managed to take root in its country of origin. It was scorned and displaced there. Hijikata himself does not even garner in Japan the cultural heft of his contemporaries and colleagues, such as Mishima Yukio, but the strength of his artistic components, multiplied as they were in erotic, poetic, and philosophical derivations, grew exponentially throughout the world due to the itinerant apostolate of some of Hijikata's first students and collaborators. This was due both to the didactic mimesis of later generations of Japanese performers who, without having known Hijikata or Ohno directly, spread their own versions of the original movement internationally, as well as to versions that numerous non-Japanese artists have taken to cultivating carefully over the decades.

In Mexico, echoes of the original *ankoku butoh* were received through refractions of Hijikata's own influence: Artaud's philosophy of exacerbation, which arrived in 1968 at the Cultural Olympiad by the incarnate filter of *The Constant Prince*, from Jerzy Grotowski, with Ryszard Cieślak as a paradigm of the sanctified actor; an esoteric symbology mixed with the Grand Guignol, which the Jewish Chilean filmmaker Alejandro Jodorowsky took to its peak in Mexico with the filming of *La Montaña Sagrada* (1973), where Horacio Salinas presented a piece figuratively infused with butoh structures; and also through the theatrical experiments of Abraham Oceransky, a stage director steeped in artistic knowledge of Asia, who in the work *Simio* (1972) mixed elements of butoh with neo-Dionysian theatrical inspirations, influenced primarily by the likes of Julian Beck, Judith Malina, and the Living Theatre.

In 1981, the contribution of Sankai Juku to the ninth edition of the Festival Internacional Cervantino – with *Bakki*, a show premiered at the Avignon Festival – caused a stir: newspapers, TV, radio programs, and salón discussions all focused intently on “cutting-edge Japanese theater”

or “the Japanese theater of cruelty.” No one drew a connection between the collective directed by Ushio Amagatsu (second generation after the original butoh) and the other dance in the festival (Martha Graham, Ballet Teatro del Espacio, and the Stuttgart Ballet).

Since then, Sankai Juku has returned to Mexico to offer three more major productions: *Unetsu*, *Hibiki*, and *Kagemi*. It is no exaggeration to say that the public shock caused in Mexico by the corporal poetics of this group, channeled through mass media communications, invigorated the circulation of basic butoh knowledge through the Mexican cultural sphere. Eight years after Sankai Juku’s first appearance in Mexico in 1989, Ohno Kazuo was a guest of honor at the Festival Internacional Cervantino featuring *The Dead Sea* and *Water Lilies*.

However, the authentic engendering and subsequent dissemination of butoh in Mexico, as well as the emergence of original artistic expressions, have taken place in Mexico through independent cultural management: a path of paths, such as “The Garden of Forking Paths,” conjured by Borges, who boldly go on producing dancers and choreographers powerfully motivated by this artistic genre, to the extent in which they find in it not only a source of artistic knowledge, but also a means to enrich the constitutive condition of the *performer* – the individual who models himself, transforming himself by action. This in turn engendered the consideration of the genre as a potential episteme for the arts of motion; that is, art as an art of living, as a renewed foundation of ethics, as was considered by Foucault during the final stage of his work.

The beginning of this significant movement of independent cultural management came in 1993 as a specific reaction to the telluric impact of the presentation of the Japanese company Byakko-Sha in the courtyard of the National Museum of Anthropology and History (Museo Nacional de Antropología e Historia). The then young dancer Diego Piñón, who had focused his dance research on the ancient Mesoamerican ritual traditions still alive in Mexico – in which the dance merges with the ceremonial ingestion of entheogens, to elicit what Mircea Eliade called “archaic techniques of ecstasy” (Eliade 1964) – captivated by the sheer extraordinariness of the spectacle, decided to dedicate himself entirely to the exploration of butoh, on a route that led him to Japan, to study under Tanaka Min, Nakajima Natsu, Yoshito and Ohno Kazuo, on several occasions. In a few years, Piñón obtained national and international recognition for his qualities as an interpreter and his aesthetic explorations as a director, in which, on many occasions, he managed to capture the communicative vessels functioning in the sets of imagery from butoh and shamanism, and eventually became a highly influential teacher in Mexico, the United States, and Canada. In his native Michoacán, he founded a center for study and artistic production, Butoh Ritual Mexicano A.C. that is frequented by students of diverse nationalities.

In the prologue to the book *Eternity in an Instant: Butoh Dance in the Voice of Its Teachers* (2014), Diego Piñón affirms,

Recuperating the origins of butoh in Japan could provide another valuable metaphor for us Mexicans, in the sense of being able to express from the depths of our being the memories stored within the collective unconscious from the multiple colonizations of which we as a people have been the object.

Segura and Guerrero 2014, 15

A stance that outlines the political focus that butoh has acquired in some Latin American countries, such as Chile and Mexico itself, has been broadly manifested and discussed in forums that, also in Mexico, have been founded as part of this line of independent cultural management, especially in the Segundo Encuentro Latinoamericano de Butoh in Mexico (Second Latin American

Meeting of Butoh, held August 2014), organized and directed by the dancer and researcher Tania Galindo, with the participation of artists from Paraguay (Anaih Chamorro), Chile (Compañía Fuchen, Lobsang Palacios, and Carla Lobos), Brazil (Joao Souza), Ecuador (Susana Reyes), and, of course, Mexico (Edwin Salas, Tania Galindo, Diego Piñón, Lola Lince, Isabel Beteta, Coco Villareal, and Eugenia Vargas). This program featured events in various cultural and outdoor spaces in Mexico City, fostering not only the coexistence of artists who have in common the professional practice of an aesthetic born in the East, in areas torn by the social problems that afflict Latin America, but also the public appearance of butoh in Mexico as a definite style, inclusive even of its contradictions. Thus, the cultural background formed by this meeting and by the aforementioned *Raíces Profundas de la Danza* (Profound Roots of Dance) forum, laid the foundations from which a couple of years later the Festival *Cuerpos en Revuelta* (Bodies in Revolt) would be launched.

It is necessary to return to the mid-1990s, when the Argentine-Mexican dancer, choreographer, and cultural manager Tania Solomonoff – in collaboration with the Japanese producer Sagara Yasuko – arranged for a visit to Mexico by Yan Shu, a group of young Japanese who (at least at that time) addressed butoh with daring and aplomb. Its director, Kinya Zulu Tsuruyama, proved himself an expert in inciting participants to overflow their gestural boundaries, generating with unprecedented eloquence expressive combinations with an extensive sensorial range. That workshop included thirty participants, some of whom were already practicing butoh on their own – such as José Pepe Bravo, Jaime Razzo, Roberto Martinez, and Tania Solomonoff herself. I participated to be able to make a public account of the experience, a story centered on the group's non-ritualistic approach, as well as on its minimal use of allusion or homage to the sources of the genre (in particular, the Hijikata paradigm). Briefly put, the educational experience with Yan Shu, which culminated in a massive performance at Ex Teresa Arte Actual in Mexico City, an unconventional theater space renovated from a church, threw the doors wide open for the encounter with butoh via transversal paths to prevailing models. Tania Solomonoff and José Bravo, certainly, two of the main figures in this workshop, have utilized resources obtained through research related to younger and older Japanese teachers of butoh, to successfully forge a particular aesthetic: the first, as a soloist who delves into connections with the visual arts and musical experimentation; the second, in charge of his own research laboratory called the Centro de Artes del Movimiento Butoyotlotl (Butoyotlotl Movement Arts Center), which, as its name implies, assumes butoh as a starting point for weaving various artistic linkages.

The transition point between millennia finds the butoh situated in Mexico as a practice both established and divergent from the way it was used in its historical foundations (Razzo, for example, leading his group, 0.618, offers something of a butoh in the dance halls: the admixture of butoh with the popular dance known as *danzón*), and as a working dimension for the itinerant masters of the first and second generations, especially Nakajima Natsu and Murobushi Kō. The latter, in an interview with the recently deceased Mexican journalist and dancer Johana Segura, stated in 2013:

Artists usually try to orbit around butoh. I have already spoken about the meaning of butoh; its movements are not those of dance. Many have turned it into a contemporary dance for commercial aims; have made it part of the system, one that must be broken by new artists. I have already said that you have to start from zero. The most important question is how? The zero is not dancing.

Segura 2013

The aforementioned interview between Segura and Murobushi directs us toward considerations of how many Western artists and philosophers (Artaud, Genet, Jung, Nietzsche, Mary Wigman, et al.) influenced the development of butoh. This question is something that Murobushi, who died in Mexico in 2015, discussed fervently in several reports produced by Latin American media. This is an important issue, as we can see by tracing a route through his journalistic statements that Murobushi was a proponent of the idea of linking the potential episteme of butoh with thinkers of post-structuralist philosophy, especially with Gilles Deleuze, from whom were derived several ideas central to working on the idea of *body* from *becoming (devenir)*, an inspiration that was quickly taken up by Latin American disciples of Murobushi, especially by Rhea Volij, the principal teacher and ballet dancer in Argentina, who in her classes proposes to deepen the conceptual link signaled here.

It is certain that, in Mexico, the institutional study of butoh is almost non-existent, though it is not entirely absent (the official research entity of the dance, Cenidid, lacks a basic program on it) seeing as in April 2016, the book *Cuerpo, Crueldad y Diferencia en la Danza Butoh (Body, Cruelty and Difference in Butoh Dance)*, by philosopher and actor Jonathan Caudillo, a disciple, of course, of Murobushi Kō, was presented at the Aula Magna of the National Center for the Arts. The book, edited by Plaza y Valdés and the National Institute of Fine Arts and Literature, fortunately traces the historicist pattern of focusing on the philosophical treatment of butoh as a subversive phenomenon, a form of frank resistance against the corporeal alienation experienced within pan-capitalism (Caudillo 2016). To this end, I would add to the bibliography of that butoh born in Mexico the aforementioned book published by (in)FLUIR and the special (trilingual) edition of *Revista DCO*, both the efforts of independent publishing, as well as several articles scattered through magazines and journals, random theses⁴ (Olmedo Castellanos 2007), and not much more.

As should be obvious, one cannot say that in Mexico has done butoh poorly, though that does necessarily not mean it has done butoh well. I mean to say that in Mexico, artistic research



Figure 32.4 Murobushi Kō, photograph by Eugenia Andrealli.

motivated by butoh is being carried out with great courage, with numerous results that bear the seal of genuine aesthetic inquiry, but which also suffer from the limitations that the arts suffer generally – being displaced from a public fabric that has deteriorated atrociously as a consequence of narcopolitics.

III

If we could establish the improbable existence of a subject called *butoh* or the *buto-esque*, we would say without fear of vagueness that such a subject in Mexico has taken root – developing late in historical time, perhaps, but nonetheless doing so quickly.

Mexico has always opened work ports for foreigners who arrive in this country to promote it, artistically and pedagogically, with success; it has brought together renowned choreographic collaborations, such as *Las Mascaras de Lilith* (The Masks of Lilith), *Hyperbole de la Memoria* (Hyperbole of Memory, performed by Lola Lince and Nakajima Natsu), and *Por donde salta la liebre* (Where the Rabbit Hops, by Rhea Volij and Isabel Beteta); it has welcomed grandiose stagings, such as *Edge*, by Murobushi Kō, and *Hibari to Nejaka*, by Byakko-Sha; and it has been a driving force for superb Mexican dancers (such as Rodrigo Angoitia and Raúl Parrao, who, along with Valentina Castro, worked in Tokyo for the piece *Edge 01*, under the guidance of Murobushi Kō) who travel outside of their native country in search of knowledge and the development of creative stimuli.

But butoh is not an entity that has an independent life outside the imaginary of artists, intellectuals, and publics interested in the evolution of that artistic performance form, originally invented by Hijikata. One can best work with it if one understands it as a forceful yet changing imaginative impulse capable of powerfully inspiring contemporary artistic work in at least three precise ways: (1) as a philosophy of technique, in the structuring of a specialized use of the body; (2) as an aesthetic defined by contrasts accentuated through dynamics, gestures, rhythms, and scenographic fields; (3) as a path toward knowledge related to the poetic transformation of the image of the body, which possesses sufficient conceptual amplitude to become at once a philosophy, a rite, and a simulacrum.

Butoh-related activity in Mexico and the rest of Latin America is most fortunate to have this conceptual amplitude, one that offers many horizons of transcendence and many constructive possibilities, in that it has created a field of analytical and poetic perspectives on the body in crisis, on the body in rebellion, on the body that seeks to emancipate itself from captivity and commands. The history of butoh, as ancient and distant as it may be, is just about to be born from the Rio Bravo to the southernmost parts of the American continent.

IV

As a kind of corollary, I would like to share an endearing memory. The event occurred at the beginning of the nineties, in the courtyard of the National Museum of Anthropology of Mexico City, which is quite a spectacle in itself. It was night. Spring had past, and the atmosphere was overloaded with electricity. More than a hundred people came to witness *Hibari to Nejaka* (*The Lark and the Reclining Buddha*), a work by the Byakko-sha group, created by Ōsuka Isamu. During the two hours in which the performance took place, the predominant sound in the public area was a profound silence: it seemed that observers did not exist. At the end of the function, the paralysis of those who watched was aggravated, but for a mere few seconds, when suddenly an irrepressible urgency compelled us to rise up at once and *en masse*. We ran to the astonished dancers to embrace them, to carry them, to squeeze them, to weep in their hands, among the

clothes or the skin of those who were at our side: we howled. I have not witnessed anything like this again: a catharsis. This memory, the most vibrant, the most intense I have had in over thirty years of assiduously watching theatrical performances, is made from butoh; it is, *stricto sensu*, what butoh means to me: an act of profound revelation.

Notes

- 1 Translator's note: this has been quoted by Octavio Paz in *El arbol adentro* (*A Tree Within*, New Directions Press, 1987), wherein it was translated by Eliot Weinberger as, "Sun more alive in the west" (65). The title of this poem follows Weinberger's rendering.
- 2 Translator's note: *Cuerpos en Revuelta* can mean "bodies in revolt," "rioting bodies," or "bent bodies."
- 3 Translator's note: this is the Spanish pronunciation of *hajimemashite*, the Japanese set phrase for "nice to meet you," which means literally, "(it) begins."
- 4 For example, "La danza Butoh: Posible herramienta del entrenamiento actoral," by Olmedo Castellanos.

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