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Edited by Bruce Baird and Rosemary Candelario

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Bruce Baird, Rosemary Candelario

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Katherine Mezur

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BUTOH'S GENDERS

Men in dresses and girl-like women

Katherine Mezur

If one imagines the iconic butoh artist, the image might be of Ohno Kazuo's small, gaunt figure in a charming dress, with a flower held aloft and dark-lined eye make-up with rose-red lipstick, against his powdered whitened skin, and sky-blue eyeshadow. Or next to Ohno, one might see the famous photographs or cine dance films of Hijikata Tatsumi whirling in his satiny flamen-co-like skirt or white female kimono. Or, one might have seen Kasai Akira's skirted or evening gown figure swirl and hover in an ecstatic leap or backbend. Or the image might be the grimaces of Ashikawa Yoko, and her chorus of women in puffy old kimonos and wigs, squatting low and stomping about in their wooden *geta*. Or perhaps the ubiquitous butoh body image is the white-powdered, nearly naked and wasted, male body, like Muroboshi Kō, with bent-knees, caved in chest, and spider-like arms, with a toothless grin, his eyes making white slits as he rolls his pupils into the upper lids. Every body, male or female or trans, genders butoh differently.

In butoh's early experimental period of the late 1950s and early 1960s, the artists' earliest mandate was to disrupt bodily prescriptions set up by the stringent postwar social standards. The male artists aimed to provoke and fracture the gender, sex, and sexuality coordinates, forcing spectators and beyond them, society, to question those set prescriptions. For butoh artists at the time, who were overwhelmingly male, the very materiality of their bodies, everything that is cellular, was their playground for gendering. The basics of hair, bones, flesh, and muscle plus all the additional accoutrements and trappings of clothes, make-up, and objects, and movement (gesture, posture, and locomotion) were (and still are) the stuff of butoh gender play/provocation. The male butoh artists from the 1960s and 1970s, who rebelled against the tyranny of the Americanized gender dynamics and postwar Japanese gender re-prescriptions, clearly chose radical hyper-gender acts to satirize, disrupt, and transform the social norms. At the heart of butoh's actions are socially prescribed sexed/gendered bodies. The male or female performer/choreographer performs a series of signature acts based on this hyper-gender. The men most often perform in dresses and other super-fem accoutrements like wigs, shawls, or flowers. Women, in contrast, amplify the feminine in a variety of modes like cute little girl-ness, old crones, or haunted female grotesques.

However, on a fundamental level, butoh's seemingly anarchist corporeality did not disrupt the mainstream heteronormative view of male and female sexualities in Japan.¹ Sabine Frühstück explains how throughout the twentieth century, Japan's social normativity "centers on heterosexuality and, through it, a gendered order of sexual matters and society" (2003, 197). Because Japan was and still is a dominantly masculinist society, where men have better access to good jobs, education,

and social status, and because of the postwar occupation and continuing military presence by American military with its own gender and racial stereotypes, the fact that early male *butoh* artists for the most part did not question male gender structures means that even *butoh* maintained a heteronormative structure with its division of male and female gendering practices and their politics.

However, picture this

It's 1969. Hijikata (1928–1986) struts along a city street in white knee-high socks, his long hair loosely knotted up. As if off to a summer *matsuri* (festival) party, this skinny man wears a girl's *yukata* (cotton kimono), tied up and back with a sash, and he carries a watermelon in a netted bag, a sure sign of summer. He gazes forward, as if he has disengaged from the mundane world around him, and focuses on his own vision of a world turned upside down. In the opposite direction, marching right to left, a line of riot-gear-ed police march by behind Hijikata on their way to contain an anti-government demonstration. A few break stride to look back at this passing girlish boy wonder. While this photograph by Fukase Masahisa has been read in different ways, especially citing Hijikata's seeming indifference to the violent street political demonstrations of that moment, here Hijikata demonstrates his contentions in broad gender stylization: he girls it, not quite drag, not quite cross-dressed, but girl-like. He genders his *butoh*.

Picture also this

It's 2015 in Aomori, Japan. As if the stage is a playground or field of summer grasses, Yuki Yuko trips out into the light, her pink little girl dress with puffed sleeves; she flutters and bounces about as she runs and skips to different parts of the stage. She wears a short-cropped wig with bangs: the perfect 1950s schoolgirl idol. She peers out at the audience, as if searching for someone. Disappointed, she cruises to another area. Tiptoeing on her red *geta* (wooden clogs), she skitters a zigzag route to center stage, flouncing down to floor, a puff of white dust from her powdered skin rises like a halo into the air. She rolls over into a curled *butoh* bug float – arms and legs bent into her chest, her eyes half-closed: Is she an embryo, a shrimp, a doll? Yuki rolls up and skips across the stage. Smiling softly, she genders her *butoh*.

Yuki and Hijikata gender their *butoh* with girl acts, their own blend of radical sweetness on the surface of their bodies. The performance twists of female-likeness seem to offer the most powerful choreographic material. The *I Love Butoh! Kamiyama Teijiro Photographic Collection*, for example, begins in the 1970s with Kasai Akira hovering and flying in his many dressed and skirted roles and continues from Ohno Kazuo to Kurosawa Mika and others, up through 2011. Throughout Kamiyama's and other photography books, male and female performers emphasize female-like gendering extremes. Despite the fact that on one level, *butoh* does not successfully disrupt heteronormative structures, it seems that over time, in costuming and movement, gendering female-likeness maintains its provocative and rebellious potential for evolving *butoh* gendering practice across many different bodies. The question then arises, is there elasticity to female-likeness or a greater potential to disruption and provocation with this feminization of gender in *butoh* performances? I suggest that the very surface or appearances of bodies in action and visual display are potent meaningful acts of power.

A careful aside

Because *butoh* artists so deeply concern themselves with the materiality of their bodies – flesh, sweat, bones, muscles, tears, hair, scars, orifices, and leakages – their gendering processes are nuanced and detailed. To focus this study, I deploy a feminist strategy of distinguishing “whose

body” and making no generalizations about any of these bodies.² I look at particular artists and consider their performative gendering and what choices they made in their time/place contexts and their relationship to earlier or contemporary butoh performers’ legacies. It is also imperative to situate this gender study in Japan, from the second half of the 20th century to the present second decade of the 21st century. Above all else, relationships of gender, sex, and sexuality, however intertwined, are situational and dynamic. Moreover, I have to deal with two different gendering streams of butoh: one for men, and one for women, each with complex gendering across these different embodiments and imaginaries and aesthetic philosophies and skills. This is complicated given Japan’s postwar history of American occupation and continued military presence, their postwar constitutional changes, and the skewed rise and fall of the economy. Into this muddled politics of governance and livelihood, women and men have had to deal and struggle differently because of these upheavals, which caused huge chasms and breaks in the social fabric of Japanese daily life and notions of family. Amongst the many changes in state governance and power, from the emperor’s divine mandate to fascist militarism to quasi-democracy, gender roles re-materialized to match the hegemonic power of postwar American and Japanese mandates.

For a theoretical framework useful for both male and female performers, I borrow from Jennifer Robertson’s research on Japanese gender representations, theories, and performance in Takarazuka, kabuki, and 20th century Japanese women’s sexuality for a few specifics on Japanese gender performance and discourse. Robertson explains how in Japan, gender is assigned according to genital type, but, the “two genders, ‘female’ gender (femininity) and ‘male’ gender (masculinity) are not ultimately regarded as the exclusive province of anatomical females and males” (1989, 50). This means there is a creative slippage and shaping of gender technologies across male and female sexed bodies. Linguistically to distinguish gender from sex, specific suffixes are deployed: “Gender is denoted by the suffix *rashii*, with its allusion to appearance or likeness. A female-like or ‘female’ gendered person is *onnarashii*, a male-like person, is *otokorashii*. The emphasis here is on the person’s proximity to a gender stereotype” (Robertson 1989, 51). Throughout this butoh gender study, I use this “likeness” suffix to distinguish certain gender actions or objects being close to that saturated stereotype of male or female likeness. This works especially for butoh, where satirical gender acts are part of the provocation, and because so much of butoh gendering by male or female sexed performers is in the magnetic field of female-likeness.

Butoh’s men and girl-likeness

Starting with Japan’s annexation of Manchuria in 1931, Marc McLelland suggests that war and its aftermath transformed male gender and sexuality in four seemingly paradoxical ways. War led “toward a reductive heteronormativity in discourse about sex and a polarization of gender roles.” At the same time, war mobilization “resulted in increasingly homosocial situations that both encouraged and facilitated homosexual interaction.” War also “required both men and women to take on gender roles at variance with official ideologies” (McLelland 2005, 10–11). Finally, McLelland suggests that Japan’s defeat and Allied occupation “served to discredit imperialist ideologies regulating sex and gender while opening up new commercial spaces for heterosexual and homosexual expression” (2005, 11).

The development of homosexuality and feminization, which connects to early butoh by Hijikata and Ohno, was coupled with the emergence of the *gei boi* (gay boy) in entertainment featuring cross-dressing and transgender performance. In the 1950s, according to McLelland, “the popularity of such performers resulted in a process of ‘touristization’ in which . . . sub-cultural bars, clubs and cabarets began to cater to a more mainstream clientele” (2005, 11–12). Interestingly this *gei boi* as transgender performance was separate from male homosexuality, which

maintained its difference from the transgender homosexual identity that was prevalent in the entertainment world. In sum, there was a new current of male transgender performance in Japan in the postwar era, existing alongside new gender stereotypes. We might consider then how the “radical” corporeality of Hijikata’s early performances arose from these various contexts.

Teresa De Lauretis reminds us that the “sex-gender system . . . is both a socio-cultural construct and a semiotic apparatus, a system of representation which assigns meaning (identity, value, prestige, location in kinship, status in the social hierarchy, etc.) to individuals within the society” (2001, 5). The sex-gender system is a powerful tool, which the butoh male founders and subsequent male and female butoh artists made into their most radically provocative technology of performance.

Could we consider that Hijikata and Ohno were performing a male gender revolt because of their histories or experiences with repressive nationalisms, the forced militarization of their wartime lives, and then the humiliation of American military occupation? Wearing dresses, female kimono, suits, underwear, wrapped loin cloth, and sometimes smeary and caked white paste all over their bodies, they were messy, dirty, and surreal, commuting between female-likeness and male-likeness, Japanese-y kitsch, and disturbing frailty; they danced a corporeal revolt, and what Stephen Barber calls “anatomical transformation and re-invented memory” (2006 63). Was this also a queer gender revolt? Did Hijikata in his association with Terayama Shūji, Mishima Yukio, and other male artists, flaunt socially prescribed corporeality to seduce and dare others into his labyrinth of writing, cabaret, and corporeal invention?

While gender performance has been part of Japanese theatrical traditions for centuries, these theatrical forms, such as *bugaku*, *noh*, *kabuki*, and *bunraku*, were also all male authored and male performed, with a few brief exceptions, in particular Okuni Kabuki and her women courtesan dancers in the early 17th century (Mezur 2005, 54–64). In these performance forms, there is a tradition of radical gender play of female and male youth genders. For example, Okuni and her women dancers freely played male youth roles (*wakashū*) and samurai, with mixed Christian and Portuguese iconography, as well as female roles in the kimono and wig fashions of the times. The later exclusively male kabuki blossomed after women were banned from the stage (1629) and when female prostitution was legalized by the shogunate. *Wakashū* kabuki was famous for its female-like *bishōnen* (beautiful boy) performers who took over the female roles and flamboyantly styled their female-like acts with longer kimono sleeves, and sashes across their shaved forelocks (2005, 64–77). The *onnagata* or female gender role specialist has continued through today with Bandō Tamasaburō V, who is not only a leader in the Grand Kabuki troupe, but also a regular player of male/female-like roles outside of kabuki, such as Queen Elizabeth I, who is a boy youth disguised as the Queen in *Contradanza-Contradanza-Contradanza* (Ors 1995). And again in the play *Nastasja* (Wajda 1989) and the later film version *Nastasja* (Wajda 1994) Bandō played both the female role of *Nastasja* and male role of Prince Mishkin. In these film and stage performances, Bandō performs female-like male roles and male-like female roles. Another twist on gendering, which started in the early part of the Meiji period and continues today, is the exclusively female Takarazuka musical theatre. Their star actors, who play the male roles (*tachikyaku*), and their star actors, who play the female/girl roles (*musume*), are required to remain in these gender roles while in the company.

Each one of these forms “genders” differently and there isn’t a direct genealogy of gendering in Japanese performance. It may be more accurate to say that Japan’s male traditions had male performers playing all gender, class, age, and race roles. Further, Japan’s society at large is male dominated in most areas of business, politics, sciences, arts, and education. It follows that butoh, even with its experimental base, is not an exception to this male body dominated world. Any gender acts in the first decade of butoh performances came out of this male-bodied world. From

the 1960s through 1990s, there was also the rise of gendered popular cultures such as boy (*bishōnen*) and girl (*shōjo*) literature, *manga* (graphic novels), *anime*, and performance. In the 1990s through today, we can see these continuing separately gendered culture waves clearly indicating the deeper gender politics of Japan as a whole.

Picture this

In *Rose-colored Dance*, Ohno and Hijikata perform sections in long dresses. I am struck by Hijikata's female-like choices, which came from different sources. In *Rose-colored Dance*, Ohno and Hijikata developé their legs and tip, arching over into a long diagonal pose legs in the air, just short of a twinned arabesque. They dip and sway in their long swirling skirts, falling around and over each other. They almost, not quite, dance a Hollywood duo, like Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire, but they are twin Gingers. Or are they twinned Martha Grahams? Hijikata goes behind Ohno, presses his face into his ear and then both pass by face to face, an intimate struggle of whose skin is whose? Cut to the backs of the men with vaginas painted like flowers on them where with each breath the vaginal lips expand. Hijikata borrows from multiple dance forms, and twists them. Like girls, Ohno explores under Hijikata's skirt, and Hijikata takes the skirt down over his head, hiding Ohno beneath, in close, intimate suffocating violence. He presses and caresses, while Ohno succumbs.

Picture this

Hijikata Tatsumi and Japanese People: Rebellion of the Body is a catalogue of gendering, with several male acts, including the golden penis section, where Hijikata performs a kind of nightclub thrust and wiggle routine, with slippery hips and his loose hair flying with his flashing reflection in the hanging mirror-like metallic set pieces. But, after his golden penis and g-strap dance, he emerges out of a female kimono, worn backwards, with its long *furisode*, fluttering sleeves, whipping out around him as he rises out of his canopied carriage. Later he whirls his satiny Flamenco skirts, and then he walks, scampers, and prances about in his little girl kimono and *geta*. In these early works Hijikata blows up the gendering. Even in a suit, Hijikata amplifies a gender caricature.

So what was Hijikata doing in his satiny dress with his partial flamenco-esque moves? Parody, masquerade, or drag seem too simple for his fluid gender audacity. Hijikata and his associates played with outrageously rebellious and subversive homosexuality and corporeal flamboyance that shafted the Western based dance forms as much as they did the Japanese traditions of form and grace. Perhaps we might consider his female gender acts the coordinated contrasts to his molting naked cocoon in *Story of Smallpox* or his flying Christ in *Hijikata Tatsumi and Japanese People* or his giant swinging golden penis apparatus?

Butoh women and girl-likeness

At the time of butoh's beginnings, sex and gender divisions were extremely narrow and strictly defined. Sabine Frühstück (2003) and Nobuko Anan (2016) outline a history of female sex and gender from the 1900s to the present. They argue that between 1900 to 1945 (the period of Japan's brutal militarization and colonization) women were urged to take part in lower level manufacturing jobs and other factory production jobs in Japan. Young women were also brutally recruited to be comfort women or sex slaves for the soldiers abroad. For a brief period in the 1920s, there was a women's movement in literature, popular culture, and sexology, which was spread across classes through women's magazines. This was destroyed in the interest of the

colonizing fascist military regime, as it spread from Japan to Korea to China and southward. Sadly, even with the end of Japan's horrible aggression throughout Asia, women never regained this moment of empowered brilliance. Instead the government returned to the pre-modern "good wife, wise mother," roles for women with the addition of "OL" or office ladies. During the occupation, the following economic boom, and political protests, women, compared to men, went through a very different postwar transformation. Not unlike other postwar nations, women were both liberated and controlled as the future of that nation.

Within that general context, there was no conception of female sex for pleasure. In Frühstück's *Colonizing Sex: Sexology and Social Control in Modern Japan*, we learn that in the 20th century modernization and military aggression set up a pattern of government control, exercised almost exclusively on women's bodies, through reproductive proscriptions. The government's attitude towards reproduction depended on whether the state needed soldiers and workers for war activities and when state authorities would deem it essential to make sure that a pure Japanese race was maintained. Up until 1965, sex education was called "purity education," which was changed to "guidance in sexual matters," whose emphasis was still on "the main aim of sex as reproduction within the boundaries of marriage" (2003, 193). Frühstück re-enforces the theme through the 20th century: in numerous circumstances, such as birth control (whether by abstinence or with condoms), the government set priorities in terms of a heteronormative goal of reproduction.

I think we have to re-read women's participation in Hijikata's early butoh performances from within these sex and gender circumstances and systems. Women were shifted from serving the nation in wartime as reproducers of state citizens to an equally heteronormative role serving the nation to reproduce consumers, and to act as consumers themselves. Yet, the power of women in the lives of butoh men is evident from Hijikata, who wrote about deeply mourning his sister and drew inspiration from her, and Ohno, who dedicated so much of his movement inspiration to his dead mother. They both turned most frequently to female gender acts to provoke, play, and inspire.

We can also see early butoh's genders shift toward a different gendering with the addition of women performers from the late 1960s on. Women performers – who as Kuniyoshi Kazuko points out, were the ones who developed butoh techniques such as *te-boke* (wandering hands), *ganimata* (bandy legs), and *beshimikata* (facial grimaces) – were outfitted in old wigs and kimono (Kuniyoshi 2004, 3). Perhaps butoh women had to push their female-likeness further, harder, and beyond stereotyped gendering, into an even more extreme "other" corporeality. They did not exaggerate "male-likeness" or even male-performed female-likeness, but chose the outrageous side of girl-ness, where cute rubs up against the grotesque. This was perhaps related to the rise of Japanese girl aesthetics, which expanded in the 1970s, and were "resistant to social constructions of gender and sexuality" (Anan 2016, 4) that equated adult womanhood to wifehood and motherhood. Early butoh women, such as Carlotta Ikeda, Furukawa Anzu, Yumiko Yoshioka, Kobayashi Saga, and Ashikawa Yoko took their female-girl-likeness in outrageous directions. Most butoh women, unlike their male counterparts, negotiated their gender processes under male direction, but arguably were able to choose their degree of female gender radicalization. Certainly, Ashikawa, one of the foremost stars of Hijikata's group, twisted and bent her body into radical female gender acts.

Picture this

In a section of the iconic work, *Hōsōtan* (Story of Smallpox), the female chorus, led by Ashikawa Yoko, wear hiked up kimono, old wigs, and wooden *geta*. They swarm and clatter about the stage in their bent legged crouched walk, with their chins thrust forward and bobbing, they look like a

clutch of chickens. When they roll over, with their feet kicking in the air, they resemble beetles, helplessly clawing the air to upright themselves. Powdered chalky white with patches over their skin, they curl up into strange shapes of embryonic creatures, shaking in their exertion. Their gendering processes extend the materiality of their female-likeness. Are they girls? Children? Imaginary girl-chicks?

Female butoh artists like Nakajima Natsu, who began her work with Hijikata and Ohno, experienced an exhilarating freedom when she trained with Hijikata's image-driven, sweaty, exhausting movement experiments. She recalled being entranced with his images and the magnetism of his presence and power (Nakajima 2000). Tamano Hiroko saw one performance and decided to join a workshop/performance because she was so excited to see this radical physicality and imagination (Tamano 2014). Butoh, for these first female trainees broke open their deeply ingrained social female gender restrictions. They could play wildly with these distorted gestures, postures, and grimaces. Tamano, Nakajima, and Yoshioka all found Hijikata's intensive group training totally self-absorbing and liberating compared to the prescriptions for Japanese women of this post-occupation era. Nakajima and Tamano reminded me that they were very young and without employment and these workshops and performances gave them a purpose and a place to belong to (Nakajima 2000; Tamano 2014). Nakajima, Tamano, and Yuki did not stay with Hijikata's group but branched out on their own (Yuki 2015). Other women like Furukawa studied with Maro Akaji and his group Dairakudakan for a short period of time but then left to form their own groups (Furukawa 1999; Seki Minako 2011). Dissatisfied with the male-led butoh cliques, all of these women went on to invent their own butoh genders (girl-like, super-femme-like, insect-like, and so forth but never male-like), and let their own gendering practices create new choreography.

The female apprentices, like Ashikawa, took on the physically daring roles with intense pleasure because they were outside their social regulatory female gender practices. Somatically, the messy make-up, old costumes, the nudity, and the absurd postures, exposing their breasts and buttocks, felt daring and pleasurable in contrast to their restricted social female gender roles within Japan's male dominated art practices and social institutions. And yet, the politics of women working harder on the cabaret circuit that kept Hijikata's butoh supplied with revenue and the risks the women took, being naked or sexually explicit, meant that their radical gender performances had the potential for being more dangerous and damaging for them than the men. At times, the women artists did a different kind of "drag" with their girl acts, which were perhaps "safer" alternatives. Even if "safely" girly in bows and girl bangs and wigs, as in *Summer Storm*, they expanded, proliferated, and challenged gendering practices of the times. Could they perform abject and cute? Could they perform female grotesques and adorable dolls?

In *Three Bellmers* (3人ベルメール), a title added to the film, *A Summer Storm* (Natsu no Arashi), Ashikawa, Nimura Momoko, and Kobayashi wear the little girl kimono, hiked up around their waists, and white powdered faces, and arms and legs, move in the squat *ganimata* walk. They wear the iconic *shōjo* (little girl) black bobbed haircut with bangs, and squeeze their faces in tight, tiny grins with their eyes pulled into white slits. How do they gender? They could be dolls, referencing Hijikata's use of Hans Bellmer, the artist who twisted female doll parts into incongruous positions, sometimes without heads and multiple legs without arms. The women bounce, scramble, and roll into butoh floats, as if their gendering girl-isms make themselves into little wind-up toys as they spin and circle in and out of unison constellations. They are girly gender toys, cute, satiric, silly, and estranged. Are they dolls, robots, pets? Do they break societal codes? Ashikawa, Nimura, and Kobayashi were very aware that their girl-gendering flaunted the carefully behaved, quiet, well-dressed office lady or mother image (Ashikawa video 1986). While the *shōjo* image has a long history, their *shōjo* acts, suggest a radically sensuous girl beyond the consumerist and reproductive model. Their girl genders fly in the face of the 1960s rebellions

and failures. Here we see butoh women's triumphs in the small belligerent acts of girl-gendered butoh. Butoh women perform a radically expanded range of material female gendering, which press female bodies into extra-ordinary dimensions.

Picture this

It's 2011 Berlin. Kaseki Yuko and Seki Minako, both second-generation butoh artists influenced by Furukawa, dance *DORODORO QUARKS*. They perform gender deformations by wearing bulbous appendages attached to their bodies. They appear posthuman, between animal, human, and thing. They queer-gender their bodies with stuffed stuff. To a blast of rock music, they tear off these exterior limbs and bumps, and prance about in Japanese underwear: *shitagi*. Their *shitagi* are male underwear: pale white short shorts and tank tops. Both women are skinny and flat-breasted so they look like girl adolescents, pop dancing, and posing in Broadway musical-style photo-op poses. Their verbal story-telling with low pitched male-language and girl-pitched sounds and gestures amplifies their hyper-female gender play. A few years later, Kaseki juxtaposes sweet and violent girl-ness in *Shoot Jeez My Gosh* (2014) when she wears a flowery girl-like dress and plays war games, when she lifts her arm and then points it like an imaginary machine gun. She scans the spectators with her "gun" and takes aim. As she shoots and shakes with the reverberations in the soundscape of gunshots, she performs shooting and getting shot. Is she shooting herself?

Ohno's gender worlds

The two previous sections dealt with the gendering typical of Hijikata and his butoh lineage. However, no discussion of butoh and gender would be complete without reference to Ohno Kazuo (1906–2010), who studied expressionist based dance under Ishii Baku and others and served in the Japanese Imperial army. However, Ohno does not fit neatly within the gender concerns of his contemporaries because of his highly personal approach to dance, which largely comes from his generational difference. Ohno was a generation older than Hijikata, and while his gendering processes may have arisen from their shared passion for radicalizing the entire schema of corporeal representation and expression in the dance world, Ohno most frequently performed his own female-like gender roles strongly influenced by his memories of La Argentina and his relationship with his mother. This butoh has in turn been a strong influence on many Japanese women butoh artists and international dancers, men and women alike.

I think if we look closely at Ohno's female-like gendering over decades, the patterns of female-like acts emerge as a gestural patterning of soft rounded arms with striking angular poses and femme fatale twists. His muscular yet small body purposefully focused on female persona, built from his female-like gender acts. Ohno was careful to wear his female-like roles and then perform them, much like the kabuki onnagata, where the actor shapes his body with the costuming, props, and then creates a repertoire of female-like gestural vocabularies, attuned to a role-type. His hair, decorations, hats, and shawls are vital physical controls for his gender actions: The flower or bow in his hair makes him tip his head coyly, on an angle. His skirt and shawl allow him to gracefully curve to the floor, or his high heels inhibit his walks and runs, by making him take small steps. He forced himself to trip lightly, to hesitate, to create a movement sequence of gentle and sensuous delicacy from these inhibiting objects. These gestures then feed his male role actions. Even in a suit or underwear, Ohno's female-likeness saturates his actions. He keeps his female acts gendering his other gender acts.

Carrying his signature flower aloft over his head or with it pinned to his hair or hat, it is Ohno in his butoh girl female drag: his carefully chosen dress, shoes, hat, flower, and thick make-up.

Perhaps even in his suited sequence in *La Argentina*, he *performs* his female gender role in male girl drag. He performs his layers of “dress.” For the opening of *La Argentina*, which is his role of Divine, the prostitute, Ohno wears a long dark velvety dress, with romantic tulle ruffles and a short coat with a white lacy collar, and his signature flower hair pin. Was he hiding in the light? In high heels and long dress, Ohno scampered, doing his tripping walk-run, girlish, childlike, with sudden stops for posing, and especially looking back, to make sure someone is looking, his gendering could have arisen from those silent films where female stars seemed to move in flickers, cutting to close ups of their demure faces, beautiful even in distress, like Ohno’s peering from beneath his hat or kissing and then clinging to the stage wall or curtain.

In *The Dead Sea* (1985) Ohno wears a pale yellow dress that hangs to just below his knees. He is a young woman or girl when he trips about the stage in his girl dress pumps. At some point he falls and crumples and has to rise again, an elder or a ghost, in a different dress, with a different bearing. The girl trips and poses in various spaces, lifted up up on his toes, but death crumples the girl into the elder woman. Ohno rises to the striking of the *gidayu* shamisen, a harsh, but poignant note from a bunraku puppet play. The elder woman in an old wig now, with her long dress and cape, robelike and heavy. Ohno fills the cape with his long outstretched arms, almost hawk-like the female-like elder now slow carves the space, doubling the gesture patterns, as if he/she has to remember where to go next. She is also dying. Ohno seems engulfed by the Dead Sea. His female-like monarch seems to sink with great weight into the sea. His gendering passes death.

Picture this

Its 2016 Los Angeles. It’s the retro-gendering by Kawaguchi Takao in *About Kazuo Ohno – Reliving the Butoh Diva’s Masterpieces*. Walking out of the performance one audience member remarked on how moved she was but “you know he just wasn’t old enough. With Ohno, age matters.” That’s it, I thought, you cannot imitate and re-perform age or gender, through memorization of mediated gendered gestures. But Kawaguchi did copy *and* queer the gender roles. Kawaguchi performs the *diva* beneath Ohno’s *diva*. In a startling moment of screened gender artifice, Kawaguchi projects Ohno Yoshito, Ohno’s son, dancing the tiny doll puppet of Ohno-as-*La-Argentina*: a crafted and haunted female-like gendering.

Picture this

In her 2000 version of *Romantic Nights*, Kurosawa Mika (1957–2016) performed an homage to Ohno Kazuo, at Bank Art in Yokohama, where Ohno’s costume dresses hung like ghosts from the cavernous ceiling. Kurosawa, who had studied with Ohno, dances in an elegant grey-blue gown, with her pearl necklace cascading down her chest. She wears an oversized satin flower on the side of her head, which is like Ohno’s signature flower or bow hair decoration. Her face and arms are delicately powdered white and circle and twist in an Ohno-esque tango beneath his hanging dresses. Kurosawa, with her long history in contemporary dance, performance art, and butoh, performs this melodramatic female gendering in her crazed search for “someone.” She trips, almost falls, and keeps frantically searching. She moves with her long white gloved arms, circling in on herself. Kurosawa inflects her gendering with Ohno’s *Argentina* and *Dead Sea*: her sweet childlike female-likeness shifts through haunted layers.

Ohno himself gendered in layers. He was all about the exterior performance first: for Ohno the tiniest detail of the bow in his hair, the powder on his hands, his heeled shoes, the flow of his dress as he sank to the floor, must exemplify the absolute artificial female-like other. That artificiality that fiction must come from the inside out: from imagination (Ohno Workshop Yokohama

1991), Ohno's genders performed this imaginary. That is, he gendered with the sense of knowing from the inside and looking from the outside at himself, that he played the exquisite artificiality of whichever female-like role he was dancing. Ohno was explicit and "out there," with every gesture and every ounce of his flesh tuned to his gender project of synthetic simulation, which must engage the audience, in their hearts and through their senses beyond the real. In his workshops, Ohno explicitly drove everyone over this edge of "real" to this dense fiction of like-ness, where one had to move into imagination (Ohno Workshop Yokohama 1990). While his global touring and unusual longevity as a performer contributed to his public renown, his gendering process and his rigorous emphasis on the *imagination* of our bodies, gave Ohno's butoh female-ness its iconic status.

Whether Ohno, Hijikata, Ashikawa, Yuki, Kurosawa, Kasai, Nakajima, or one of countless other butoh dancers: there is nothing certain about butoh's genders, except that female-likeness haunts every body, with its sensuous, sweet, and violent politics.

Notes

- 1 For an in-depth historiography of sexology and social control see Sabine Frühstück's *Colonizing Sex* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).
- 2 The purpose of this chapter is not just to focus on the activities of women artists and female bodies; after all, the way male performers gender butoh was (and continues to be) an important part of butoh. However, it is worth noting that when many other researchers have written about "bodies" within butoh studies, they have primarily considered male bodies, media, and performance, but referred to those bodies in generalized ways that ignore issues of gender (see for example, Baird, Barber, Centonze, Eckersall, Kuniyoshi, and Sas).

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