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WHEN THE “REVOLT OF THE FLESH” BECOMES POLITICAL PROTEST

The nomadic tactics of butoh-inspired interventions

Carla Melo

My dance . . . flaunts its aimlessness in the face of a product-oriented society. In this sense my dance . . . can naturally be a protest against the ‘alienation of labor’ in a capitalist society. . . . Human remodeling will be accomplished only by getting involved with a dreaming lethal weapon that has long ignored the poverty of politics.

– *Hijikata Tatsumi*

In this excerpt from an essay titled “To Prison,” Hijikata Tatsumi, in usual contradictory fashion, managed to dissociate the notion of protest from a goal-oriented event, only to propose (a few pages later) that he aimed at nothing less than a “remodeling” of the human – a transformation which was to be enacted through a violently surreal tactic that rejected politics-as-usual. Could this ambivalence, expressed by none other than the founder of butoh, be the reason why a well-known Japanese butoh artist begged my former performance ensemble to “please” not use butoh for “political purposes”?

Butoh has always been political. From its inception, in the midst of Japan’s postwar identity crisis and political turmoil, to its myriad mutations across cultural and national borders, butoh has developed as a plural and elusive mode of performance. Yet, in spite of butoh’s resistance to being defined and codified, the only element that seems to connect the wide range of manifestations under its globalized “umbrella” is a deconstruction of the codes inscribed upon the body. Clearly, as the body becomes a site of transgression, it performs “political-ness” – even in butoh’s most abstract or seemingly hermetic permutations.

In the last thirteen years as a butoh artist, I have been particularly interested in the exploration of a kind of butoh that takes the space of agitprop while subverting its tactics, that is, I have been moved by a desire to make the inherent political-ness of butoh more explicit, while attempting to retain its potential depth and ambiguity. In this sense, my praxis has been focused on mobilizing butoh as a mode of protest – on occupying public space to stage direct references to broader political manifestations, while disturbing the coherent narratives of the movements behind them.

It is important to note that what I am calling “my praxis” is a “butoh-inspired” exploration that has developed out of a dialogical relation between my own hybrid reinterpretation of the mode¹ and the ways that a diverse and interdisciplinary group of collaborators heterogeneously processed what butoh meant for them. As a collaborative act of ethical cultural appropriation and re-imagining, this dialogue eventually produced a very specific aesthetic and politics that made the performances of *Corpus Delicti* (2003–2008) known in a number of Los Angeles communities. Since co-founding and co-directing this ensemble, I have continued my butoh exploration as a deviser of ad-hoc groups and as a solo performer in other sites across the Americas, including São Paulo (Brazil), Montreal, Toronto (Canada), and Santiago (Chile).

In this chapter, I will briefly elaborate on the activist potential of butoh through analyses of urban interventions performed in Los Angeles and Brazil. These reflections are guided by the same key questions that have continuously instigated my butoh praxis: Could the polymorphous and polysemic “dead body” of butoh – often described as a philosophy and process centered on “being” as opposed to “doing” – be used for addressing specific political issues without losing its signifying power? Could the metamorphic and porous butoh-body engage in political representation, since the last often relies on fixed positionalities? Is there a history of mobilizing butoh for “political purposes”?

Tracing a genealogy of this phenomenon is a difficult task; the archive on such praxis is quite scarce. In spite of the plurality of approaches to this radical art form, its performances largely appear rather concerned with liberation at the level of self – their political power seems to lie within butoh’s aspiration towards a psychophysical rebellion. That does not mean that butoh rejects referents to broader social concerns. Hijikata himself deliberately referenced taboo topics through the embodiment of marginal identities (1961, 44–48). Although explicit alignment with political causes is rare, it tends to fall along a spectrum that ranges from independent guerrilla actions² to site specific performances that memorialize the dead,³ to butoh actions that sympathize with wider social causes, including animal rights,⁴ disease visibility,⁵ and anti-war movements.⁶

Corpus Delicti Butoh Performance Lab (www.corpusbutoh.org), an example of the last category, was founded by myself and my “partner-in-crime,” Joe Talkington, as an ensemble focused on creating butoh-inspired urban interventions as forms of silent protest to the then impending occupation/war on Iraq. Moved by a desire to historicize that crisis, our goal was to contextualize it within a long list of US military interventions, while establishing links between that post-9/11 moment and the postwar Japan in which butoh had developed – especially since, as John Berger has suggested, the two events could be viewed as markers of both the launching of US global dominance, and the beginning of its demise (2007, 44). In this sense, our appropriation of butoh was, at once, a signifier of this historical contingency, a vehicle for public mourning, and a trope for the human costs of war. Although our work’s strategies evolved considerably along our five-year trajectory, our initial tactic was to employ the ghost-like aesthetics of butoh as a metaphor for the invisible bodies anonymously buried in mass graves as a result of US interventions.

In a strategically utopian gesture we put out a call: “Join us in dance to stop the war!” Although my idea was to create “moving mass graves” that would randomly appear on the streets of Los Angeles, those who responded to our invitation voiced the desire to join the first anti-war march that took place on February of 2003. And so, dressed in rags collected in the trash bins of LA’s fashion district, nearly thirty of us took to the streets. When our slow moving white-painted bodies obstructed the barricade of police officers on motorcycles pushing the end of the march on Hollywood Boulevard, they threatened to run us over if we did not move faster. I turned, faced them, and raised my arms, walking backwards, at the same pace. True to our “flocking” technique, the group followed me. Then, the crowd on the sidewalks began to cheer us to “go slower!” as a few hesitant spectators left their safe spots and stepped in between us and the cops, in a gesture of protection and defiance. Instantly, the space of the march was modified: it was

no longer solely created by a linear movement forward, but also by a flux between sidewalk and street. Although we were, within minutes, forced to end the confrontation and give in to the cops' orders, some of the passersby even joined our "flock" as we left the march. We seemed to have literally moved people into action; so had we just reproduced the agitprop tradition? According to Jan Cohen-Cruz:

Agitprop is a militant form of art intended to emotionally and ideologically mobilize its audience to take particular action vis-à-vis an urgent social situation [with] emblematic costumes and props, character types familiar to the broad range of spectators . . . and an ideological resonance with the public spaces where they are presented.

Cohen-Cruz 1998, 13

Even though that performative moment seemed to fit this definition, the mode of participant-spectatorship that emerged was far from the intended. Besides, spectators seemed to be mobilized less by persuasion than through witnessing our vulnerability and disobedience. Also, as our performance stood in great contrast to the overload of words surrounding us, it evoked images that though similar, still contained a subtle variety of meanings. *LA Weekly* dance critic Sara Wolf, who was also a participant, ironically described some of the reactions:

From the moment we head out, our group – now grown to 24 – commands attention. Tourists' cameras flash along Hollywood Boulevard. Applause erupts. Drivers pull over to ask who we are. True to our intention, we trudge mutely onward without answering. People speculate out loud that we're the walking dead. Others say we're angels. Or the victims of 9/11. The shadows of Nagasaki. Iraqis fleeing a bombed-out village.

Wolf 2003, 12–13



Figure 39.1 Corpus Delicti, street protest performance. Hollywood Boulevard, Los Angeles, CA (February 15, 2003), photograph by Hamidah Glasgow.

The coexistence of “victims of 9/11” with that of “Iraqis fleeing” demonstrated that the polysemic power of *butoh* had not been lost in a space dominated by well-defined messages. In fact, the organizers, who got upset with our apparent “lack of clarity” and asked us to focus on positive and constructive alternatives instead of dwelling in the “darkness,” spelled out this desire. Little did they know that our inspiration was in fact a “dance of darkness.”

Notwithstanding the excitement of this debut, we took our processional appearances to varied neighborhoods throughout the city, as originally envisioned. As we acquired some visibility, we began to receive invitations to present within art and theatrical spaces. With a regularity that went from bi-weekly to monthly, we moved from commercial promenades to inner-city streets, from beaches to cemeteries, from indie theatres to galleries and museums,⁷ from avant-garde wings of orchestra halls⁸ to performance art venues.⁹ Our numbers averaged ten in any given performance and the fluid core group, formed by six to eight members, included *butoh* performers, dancers, designers, writers, visual artists, and musicians.

Except for devised choreographed pieces in theatrical venues, gallery and urban performances were largely durational and based on structured improvisation. Our basic structure interspersed “flocking” as “empty vessels” with wild, more theatrical improvisations instilled with loaded actions that viscerally engaged with signifiers of that war. Deploying a make-shift aesthetic, some of us crafted “bombs” made from small water bottles, “dead babies,” with paper mâché and wearable “tanks” out of cardboard, etc. Some of the actions included: “vomiting oil,” “water-boarding,” and “corn-starching,” which literally involved using corn-starch to “bomb,” “bury,” or “bless” a fallen body. The action also referenced the police procedure of outlining the contours of crime victims, so the traces of our presence on the asphalt evoked a “*corpus delicti*.”¹⁰

As our aesthetics expanded in theatricality, with costumes and props that explored ambiguity and grotesque surrealism,¹¹ our fluid characters and installations sought to problematize the binarism found in guerrilla genres. Our “Lady Liberty” was a good example of a character that defied expectations, as a closer look at our version of the icon would reveal that her crown was made out of syringes. Once, while embodying her, I broke away from the flocking and used the image of “becoming a tree,” wishing to convey a breathing, statuesque presence. As people gathered around me, I “became human” and, in jerky spasms, tried to inject myself without taking off the crown and without using my hands. I carried this action for a few minutes, until someone actually helped *her*. Yet, interaction was not always incidental and the work not always dark. Certain pieces deployed a fair dosage of humor as a way to incite participation and critical engagement with the issues evoked; for instance, in an art gallery performance/installation titled “Guantanamo A-Go-Go,” spectators were lead to engage in a grotesque Karaoke that potentially foregrounded their complicity with what they stood against.

I believe that our effective subversion of traditional guerrilla theatre relied on the combination of our “nomadic” presence, polysemic aesthetics, and improvisational language. Although some members of the group felt that performing within art institutions constituted “selling out,” I found that this migration across sites of varying cultural capitals could be quite subversive. Not only did it kept us from being labeled, it also allowed us to reach a wider public while disturbing the limits between avant-garde and political performance traditions. I was particularly invested in probing the notion that guerrilla performance had to be didactic and clear in order to be effective. I also wanted to challenge the ways in which poor, racially marked subjects were generally perceived as less capable of understanding more abstract artforms. Not surprisingly, the incidental audiences that our work tended to engage the most were those who had been least exposed to “modern art” – a label heard at higher income areas, seemingly functioning as an easy way to detach.

It was with a similar motivation and theatrical language that I’ve (co)created *butoh*-inspired collective and solo performances elsewhere. One performance that captured the particular

challenges of using butoh as a form of protest was staged in 2013 in response to the forced displacement of marginalized subjects from “Praça Roosevelt,” a famous São Paulo square. As a result of gentrification policies to “revitalize” the downtown area, an exotic dance club had been recently demolished, and sex workers, homeless people, and a farmers market had been evicted from the site after many decades of friendly conviviality.

Along with an ad-hoc group of female performers,¹² I staged a site-specific carnivalesque piece in honor of those who could no longer work there. Embodying the absence of sex workers, six performers, including myself, had our white-painted bodies minimally dressed in brightly colored underwear and/or slippers and our faces masked with extravagant and grotesque make up, while two other performers referenced the fruit sellers in bright clothes and head scarfs. Colorfulness was key to a piece inspired by carnival parades – an intervention that staged how two groups of displaced and stigmatized bodies could only reclaim a place so central to their livelihoods and identities when moving together. As “prostitutes” we began across the street from the square with our bodies laid against a metal fence that covered up the ruins of the strip club. Each of us had a photo of the ruins pinned to our clothing, so as we slowly stood up, lined up against the metal fence, we created a surreal image: it was as if each body had a hole that revealed the hidden ruins behind the fence. The image clearly performed a strong identification with the site.

Then, carrying a carnival banner that read “Praça Roosevelt United” (signaling a sense of belonging), I lead an improvised reclaiming of the square through a combination of flocking and what I call “organized chaos”: a choreography evoking the search for one’s place as part of a collective and environment. I chose to reference a carnival’s tradition of parading-groups gathered under the banner of a neighborhood to reinforce the association between place and identity that forced displacement disregards. Besides, as Bakhtin has taught us, a suspension of social hierarchies is inherent to carnival (1968, 89). In using a popular tradition that carves out



Figure 39.2 Alegria e Elegia: Unidos da Praça Roosevelt Pedre Passagem. Group street performance directed by Carla Melo, resulting from workshop she gave at the Hemispheric Encuentro of Performance & Politics: Cities/Bodies/Action: The Politics of Passion in the Americas (Praça Roosevelt, São Paulo, January 2013), photograph by Tânia Farias.

temporary room for outcast subjects within public space, our goal was to lend agency to those whose absence we sought to embody. Similarly to Corpus' tactics, I did not intend the we "represented the Other," but rather, embodied its absence in the presence of our grief, confusion, and complicity with capital-driven logics that [re]produced the Other's oppression.

What became problematic in this performance were the ways in which the normativity of the female bodies involved and the excessive femininity that the minimal costumes signaled, could trigger a hyper-objectification, in other words: no amount of grotesque make-up could keep those bodies immune to the gaze, which magnified the exoticizing danger that lurks around butoh. This danger could have been mitigated with a longer period of development, through which the characters' vocabulary and costumes could have evolved in complexity and become less susceptible to exoticism. Of course, the display of flesh was deliberate as it fit both the carnival theme and the work of the characters. Yet, the act of reclaiming the prohibited site could have used a greater dosage of transgression, perhaps by adding males in drag or non-binary gender subjects. This said, given the minimal hours of rehearsal, the piece also revealed the "magic" that can happen when a "collective body" made up of performers in a heightened state of openness becomes a conduit for varying affects that flow in response to a cause, each other and the unpredictable environment, to the point that seemingly choreographed moments emerge and disappear amidst the chaos and vulnerability of not-knowing.

The urgency of certain causes, financial limits, and a philosophy of democratic access to butoh as protest create ensembles of varying levels of training and understanding of its "trance-formative" potential. Nonetheless, these factors also allow protest-butoh to remain open to unknown paths. It is precisely the goal of wandering "aimlessly" (to evoke Hijikata) that makes the butoh I have co-developed with other artists, multi-dimensionally political. Butoh becomes protest when its explicit politics dances in those liminal space between outrage at asymmetries of power and the Foucauldian lesson that power is everywhere, between the abstract and the literal, the public and the private, the individual and the collective. This is where (as feminists reminded us) not only is the personal political but the political intensely [trans]personal. Some say, "the revolution starts within." Butoh-as-reinvention-of-guerrilla-theatre suggests that the limits between within and without, between micro- and macropolitics may be that which halts revolutions at every level.

Notes

- 1 My praxis is also informed by my position as a Latina in North America.
- 2 A protest against art censorship in front of MOCA (Museum of Contemporary Art, LA). See <http://esteechoa.com/art-in-the-streets/>.
- 3 Suzuki Ikko and Kawachi Kirara annual performance at a site that survived the 1945 bombing of Eastern Tokyo (see Broinowski 167); Daisuke Yoshimoto's tribute to the Armenia genocide. See www.wroclaw.pl/en/wroclaw-for-armenia-in-commemoration-of-genocide-events.
- 4 Several butoh artists have performed within Greenpeace protests; another example is SU-EN's *The Chicken Project*: animal rights related work, based on "living as a chicken" (see Crump, 62–63).
- 5 Vangelina theatre performed on the streets of New York along with a protest to bring visibility to Lyme disease. See www.truth-out.org/news/item/25963.
- 6 Broinowski created solo anti-war performance/protests (see Broinowski 168–183).
- 7 Los Angeles County Museum of Art.
- 8 REDCAT: Walt Disney Hall, LA.
- 9 Highways Performance Space, Santa Monica.
- 10 Latin: "crime evidence."
- 11 Thanks to the talents of Krystine Kryttre and Talkington; they crafted most props, sets and costumes.
- 12 Erica Ocegueda, Rosemary Candelario, Marta Haas, Mary Notari, Christina Baker, Laissa Rodriguez, and Alejandra Jimenez.

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