

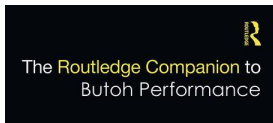
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Locus Solus – Locus Fracta

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LOCUS SOLUS – LOCUS FRACTA

Butoh dance as protocol for visual self-representation

Lucile Druet

Introduction

This chapter discusses the impact of butoh performances, imagery, and writings on my practice as a visual artist and performer as an example of the impact of butoh on artists outside of Japan. My practice as a photographer and videographer developed both in France and Japan, creating and editing series of pictures alternating with video projects, interrogating the theme of self-portrait using dance, performance, makeup, kimono, *ukiyo-e*, black and white, superposition of lines and surfaces, framing, blurs, fades, and montage.¹

At the core of the corpus is Japan: Japan as a motif, Japan as a manifesto, an *akogare* 憧れ to tend to, to long for, a motto or in Japanese *zayū* 座右² that I reached for with my hands, eyes, and camera, nurtured by my studies, practices, and experiences. My choice of going to Japan was not as a caprice or a quest for unification or identity, rather it is an exploration of what appeared to me as a *heterotopia* (Foucault 1967), a space where the words, shapes, and forms of others would work as a beckoning, inviting way for developing and articulating my imagery in an assumed fractured modality. A way where the answer is not in the *why* but in the *how*. An approach that is both emotional and intellectual, navigating between intuition and language, aware of its limits and qualities of being between East and West. A navigation that uses distance and collage between all these intuitions and languages as a valid method for creating pictures. A posture deeply rooted to the idea of creativity and visibility working on a deep interconnected relationship, as Antonin Artaud argues:

In the Oriental theater of metaphysical tendencies, as opposed to the Occidental theater of psychological tendencies, this whole complex of gestures, signs, postures, and sonorities which constitute the language of stage performance, this language which develops all its physical and poetic effects on every level of consciousness and in all senses, necessarily induces thought to adopt profound attitudes.

Artaud 1938, 44

Butoh came to me wrapped up in the middle of this intricate relationship with Japan, not only as a concrete organic process, but also as a training that became an effective way to involve simultaneously dance, posture, visibility, presence, and deconstruction, a protocol that helps articulate

my practice between performance, photography, and video. In other words, butoh represents for me a code with which I could start playing during my performances (video and photo), tying together ideas of haptic and atavistic choreography with physical and spiritual presence, not to “make” something Japanese in an outdated *Japonisme* way but in a multilayered, total take on the understanding of Japanese culture, arts, and languages.

With time, a constellation of references and imageries to work with visually and metaphorically started to form, and it worked for me as a set of stances and stages to go back and forth, traveling between obscurities and epiphanies, a process of growing thick, stripped, cut, flayed, mangled, and more mature at the same time. As Shu Kuge phrases it, it is for me a dynamic process that: “Translates *erlebnis* (lived experience) or *taiken* (bodily experience) into *erfahrung* (structured experience) or *keiken* (ordered experience or wisdom)” (Kuge 2003, 3). A process that starts to exist because of the potential space it starts opening between brutality and elegance. A procedure cultivating a “silent threshold between language and body. This threshold or gap can be constituted by a brief spatiality, an instance in which the temporal flow of the discursive becomes idle” (Kuge 2003, 71), and in which a sense of butoh as the very place I want to be becomes pivotal, forming the axis I chose to build not only the modalities of my visual appearance and corpus but also shaping the way my body dances. Here, too, Shu Kuge puts the equation in interesting and inspiring terms: “Why is the place so important? For there is no body that does not belong to a space; the presence of the body also means that of space. Without place, there will be no ‘experience’” (Kuge 2003, 78).

Ambivalence and attitudes

I am left standing by the wall among the flowers. . . . I hold a stalk in my hand. I am the stalk. My roots go down to the depths of the world, . . . through veins of lead and silver. I am all fibre. All tremors shake me, and the weight of the earth is pressed to my ribs. Up here my eyes are green leaves, unseeing. . . . I am rooted to the middle of the earth. My body is a stalk. I press the stalk. A drop oozes from the hole at the mouth and slowly, thickly, grows larger and larger. . . . She has found me. I am struck on the nape of the neck. She has kissed me. All is shattered.

Woolf 1931

At first, butoh helped channel the dance in me. In other words, butoh was appealing to the dancer in me as it appeared as a phenomenal kind of dance, playing with a stage presence that deals with its own difficulties of being post-modern, resisting, underground, stubborn. A dance that would not celebrate a spectacular unified body with a specific role, nor a virtuoso belonging to an elite, but a *bricolage* body in full interaction with skin, costumes, and darkness, a possible embodiment for a *tabula rasa*, a display case for something emerging and disappearing at the same time, a dance assuming its fractures and uncertainties, being away from definition and linear language. Ohno Kazuo and Hijikata Tatsumi but also Roland Barthes, their writing inspired in me a certain way of thinking the post-modern dancing body, as they articulate something about this moment of loss and contrast, solitude and fracture that happens when one dances: quite accurately Ohno writes,

You there, you flower in bloom. . . . but it vanished as unexpectedly as it appeared. . . . I can still feel its presence. . . . Dance has got to be crazy. . . . yet the moment you deliberately set out to talk with it, it suddenly vanishes. In any event, let your dance be crazy. Don't figure your movements out in your head. Dance free style.

Ohno 2004, 202

And Hijikata adds:

Once onstage you create a new role from what you have perfectly remembered. It too is creating a role of forgetting. This method of forgetting in the midst of forgetting is a mechanism that means you don't want to touch what you have once forgotten.

Hijikata quoted in Akihiko 2000, 66

Finally, Barthes says:

My language is a skin: I rub my language against someone else. It is as if I had words instead of fingers, or fingers at the tips of my words . . . I wrap the other in my words, I caress it, I graze it, I maintain this light touch, I exhaust myself at maintaining the commentary under which I submit the relationship.

Barthes 1977, 114

When elaborating the dance for my series of photos and videos, the numinous, sometimes extravagant performances of Sankai Juku, Dairakudakan and most importantly Carlotta Ikeda (Ariadone) who was always questioning theatricality and presence, were especially pivotal to me. Away from the arabesques of established dance, Ikeda's involvement, throughout her butoh career, with the volcano, the princess, the thorn, circus, mythology, and burlesque figures, at the same time ghost, witch, statue, stripper, flower, sphinx, and *koma-inu* showed to me that butoh is a form whose corporeality developed by moving back and forth between nihilism and arousal, stubborn stillness and movement. Going a little further, I think that Ikeda in her work was always forming a way to erase and shift the conventional feminine body and nuance her visceral, imperious desire to express emotions through dance with skin and femininity seen then as a haptic and ethereal interface.

Her performances, like a synecdoche, helped me adjust my relationship with my body and dance, playing with the photogenic and metaphorical aspects of alpha-female desires, smiles and tears, both young and old, sexual and asexual, lonely and social, displaying in an articulated fashion costumes, makeup, and scenography to bluntly and yet gracefully show the cracks, the bends, the folds that a woman can assume and celebrate. A presence in movement, a she, a resolute she:

She breathes in darkness on the verge of emptiness.
She needs air, her body shrivels and then stretches.
She is in search of her own centre, deep down
She cannot see, her head out of water
Her tight forms scream silence
She sweats her stories
[. . .]
Her strength puts her to sleep
and her peace wakes her up
She floats
and disappears
She is still there

Vérité 2005, 163

Exploring butoh performances prompted different ideas about how to build a body of my own, visual and butoh-esque. Both well-anchored and helter-skelter, the body I started to create

thanks to and through the skin of butoh resulted in a figure, a dancing and acting form always in transition between vibration and stiffness. Adorned and dusty, the butoh body came to me as an ambivalent yet solid locus employing the skin as a binary system always in dispute between integrity and legitimacy versus doubt and hesitation. As Ikeda puts it, a body, through the staging of the skin, becomes something between humanity and animality, poise and absurdity: “My dance lies somewhere in between the role of the character on stage, the animal and me” (Ikeda 1997).

She continues,

When I dance, there are two persons in me, living together: one in trance, that does not control itself any longer, and the other observing the first one with lucidity. Sometimes, these two “I” coincide and give birth to a sort of white madness, close to ecstasy. That is how the butoh dancer must try to feel. It is for that privileged moment that I dance.

Ariadone Dance Company 2017

In exploring this ambivalent dimension of the body in butoh, I’m starting to envision the body as a performing figure transformed by the bodies of others, animals and cosmos, crying the tears of another face, trembling the fears of another skin. Sharing a locus with death, with otherness, as Hijikata declares,

We shake hands with the dead, who send us encouragement from beyond our body; this is the unlimited power of Butoh . . . We can find Butoh in the same way we can touch our hidden reality. Something can be born, can appear, living and dying in a moment. This cast-off skin is our land and home.

Hijikata quoted in Hoffman and Holborn 1987, 121

On the same note, when Ima Tenko³ says, “there is a dance for each human body” (Tenko 2014), she might not only be pointing at humans and dancers but also at what is lying on the other side, the negative, the invisible beings a human can channel, a threshold of many possibilities, of many memories. A transgendered shape shifter with an *idée fixe*, either dealing with the animal or otherness, never alone and yet lonely.

Following the same train of thought, I can’t help but think that butoh signals a presence that tenuously connects with romantic ballet dancing and poetry: in both stances one can see how the feminine figure dancing is like a white sign, a white swan whose torso, breathing slips, raises, shrinks, bends, breaks, a flint going to sleep here, a spark coming of age there. As the author and poet Stephane Mallarmé puts it in his *Crayonné au Théâtre*:

The female dancer *is not a woman who dances*, as for these juxtaposed motifs that *she is not a woman*, but a metaphor resuming one out of several aspects of our elementary form, sword, cup, flower etc. . . . and that *she is not dancing*, suggesting, by the prodigy of leaps and momentums, with a corporeal writing what would take paragraphs . . . poem free from any writer’s pen.⁴

Mallarmé 1897, 173

Performative visualities

But here I am nobody. I have no face. . . . We are all callous, unfriended. I will seek out a face, a composed, a monumental face, and will endow it with omniscience, and wear it under my dress like a talisman and then (I promise this) I will find some dingle in a wood where I can display my assortment of curious treasures.

Woolf 1931

On another level, butoh appealed to the visual artist in me. Butoh helped shape the role self-representation was having in my photo and video projects. In terms of imagery, viewing butoh initiated my understanding of the power and modalities of self-presence one can shape, individually and collectively. Looking at performances and photo books, one can see how butoh dancers forget the ballerina and pursue the freakish yet simultaneously signal back at convention and the almost-necessary categorization of things and beings, and in doing so, they can create a strong, visually powerful set of performances.

On this very point, I yet again see a duality, nurturing a *je-ne-sais-quoi*, at the same time frail and adamant, something working against what it is and what it is not, against dissemination and finitude. Such dualities can be found in Ohno's creation *Breathing the Spirit of Soga Shōhaku* (1997)⁵ or the *ukiyo-e* projections of the Asbestos Dance studio (2002),⁶ both playing with projections of ink paintings and woodblock prints on their bodies. I wanted to deal with that characteristic in my work as it adds yet another interface, something tailored that I can slip into, covering and revealing at the same time something slow, borrowed, old, new, found, confident, and lost. This concept led to creating a series of photos⁷ and a corpus of videos⁸ dealing with these kinds of questions: Is it a self-portrait if no one can recognize the author? Can one be sincere, be even present when wearing so many folds, wrappings, and masks? What kind of self-portrait is it when one can see so many different layers, masks, and blurs? A dissemination, a figure, a body, whose body? It doesn't matter. In retrospect, what matters is to show how it is to work on and with one's own body as it is the closest within reach, with double folded posture and appearance: choreographer and dancer. To show a visual way to inhabit one's silhouette, hands, hips, shoulders, feet, tights but also nudity and femininity, through tulle, kimono, make-up, framing, and montage.

Concretely speaking, I built my series on two stances: the first one being the time of the dance, time when body, costumes, improvisation, and bricolage come up and play together. The second one being the time of the video/photo editing, when montage, cuts, music synchronization, breaking, and layering occurs. In terms of material and techniques, I like to play with all the above mentioned (body, butoh, make-up, kimono, montage) and mix them with ideas such as imitation and mimicry, and I let the magic of improvisation happen. As a result, I get a mass of material, more or less ready-made I can knit, knead, and mold with my cut, copy and paste editing technique.

The two pictures inserted in this text particularly show how I like to put my body in an utopian mode⁹ where I not only play with my presence but also the familiarity with shadows, lines of carefully chosen woodblock prints, framing, black-and-white balance, and exposure.

The first one, from the *Koma/The Chapter* series (2014) (Figure 53.1), plays with a work by Tsukioka Yoshitoshi titled *Catching Fireflies* (1888). With timer set on the camera, I join hands, bite on the *uchiwa* fan, shift to be in a similar position to the woman in the print, and wait. I reiterate until I have enough pictures to work with. I then do the rest with Photoshop, using layer blending modes and transparency to obscure or reveal enough of my silhouette. Tweak an angle here, remove of mole there. Done. I like when it is instantaneous like this, almost as if I were illustrating the Zen principle: *Ichigo-ichi-e* 一期一会 (One time, one meeting).

The second one (Figure 53.2), from the *Mononoke Hime* series (2015), plays with several *ukiyo-e* prints, all based on ghost stories. The setting is very simple: a small room with just enough light coming from outside the door, no windows, camera on tripod and timer mode. I pose, I shift, I turn, I twist. The body with the shadows, the white, the grey, and the black. After the session, I work with the computer and start the montage, creating time and space where things are here and yet ambivalent, like when you squint.



Figure 53.1 Lucile Druet, *Koma/The Chapter*, 2014 (digital photograph). Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 53.2 Lucile Druet, *Mononoke hime*, 2015 (digital photograph). Courtesy of the artist.

Ultimately, what I visually build in my works is a sense of bodily montage, a hybrid, inhabiting a space (stream, bedroom) where tension and repose circulate freely. Here I share the view developed by Amagatsu Ushio:

We consider tension as the main element and relaxing as a subordinate. However, I would like here to take a reverse position from this general opinion we have on dance. Tension is the one element that should be set back compared to relaxing. If we observe things from that angle, we can then see that a child lying down, abandoning his body to Earth gravity is therefore dancing.

Amagatsu and Delahaye 1994, 102–103

Out of public sight, the dance/the pose is created in-situ, impromptu. It is here to work as a visually, playing with non-dance: part of the process being not incorporating repertoire dance movements but rather everyday movements yet moving as if impelled by someone else, a puppet master of some sort. Butoh in that sense represents an active way that teaches me how to be passive, how to deal with my techniques and reveries, control and craziness, on stage and backstage qualities and limits. Fragmented, organic, the body I want to expose and explore in my series of works included butoh most naturally as if incorporating a new vocabulary. Not a Japanese one but a butoh one, expressing metaphorically qualities of the mineral, vegetal, human, or aquatic through an organic framework with many layers, branches, limbs, and fins, building a possibility for personal mythology. This idea of navigating in a fictional universe is once again branching out from my observation of different butoh performers and companies, especially when they are using a totem or a psychopomp as an agent for dance: a weasel (*Kamaitachi*, Hijikata), a dancer from the other side of the planet (*La Argentina*, Ohno), a water spirit (*Hisoku*, Ima Tenko), mythological tutelary figures (*Ariadne*, *Medea*, *Zarathoustra*, Ikeda). All of them have been potent symbols not only for the dancer but for the performance itself, as it is what remains in the end: the metaphor, the imagery, the visual. Superficially chaotic, it is nonetheless organized around strong aesthetic choices: the contrast between black and white or the absence of it, the framing, the composition, the one/long shots, all those visual elements carefully chosen just like the poetic and engaging aspects of butoh. Exploring how they connect gave me a reflexive and more synoptic view of not only dance but visual creation.

Conclusion

My interaction with butoh is a space for dance and visual performance that I want to cultivate and grow old with. I want it as a long-term experiment, an ongoing creative process that inspires and establishes a long-lasting referential system, pivotal to my works, past and future. A project where butoh teaches me something about Japan, about myself, about dance, the backstage, the obscene, and vice-versa, always the same, always different, inexhaustible past that never seems to vanish.

Between *Ghost in the Shell*, *In Praise of Shadows*, *The Empire of Signs*, and *Madame Chrysanthème*,¹⁰ I see my work as a compound, a fold of naïveté and maturity, regulated by a multiplicity of choices, timings, quotes, lines and contours, parallels and geodesic. What is ultimately expressed on the screen is not a result but an “in progress” body, a kimono-butoh-gray-black-and-white like presence both decisive and vague, massive and refined, dancing produced through the magic of the editing (fades, cuts, post-produced synchronization with

music). A presence attained through the accumulation of words, filiations, exegetical explanations, and poetical interpretation of its attitude and visuality that cannot be reduced to a simple equation, a body oozing with energy both dark and light, sincere and fake. A thing to see although the only thing it seems to perform is pointing at a grey zone where almost nothing happens but a duration. A butoh body replete with folds, nooks and corners, frames and captions; not easy to decipher but something else, aside and outcast saying, “this is a crisis yes but it is my own.”

In conclusion, butoh works for me as a chosen and necessary restraint for a body who doesn't necessarily need to go anywhere (especially in the videos): a room (*Elephantine, Somosomo*), a stream (*The Nine Sisters, Dead Space-Eurydice*), a lover's embrace (*Palladium Apparel-Shinayakana kemono*), a garden (*Yumi*), something magnetic, both compass and North Pole, finding a dwelling in this ambivalent attitude, performative visuality. And by doing so, leaving things procrastinated, tucked up in this bittersweet feeling of things that are hurting and yet giving bliss, cherished and unresolved ellipsis.

This side, never fixed, never attached, sleeping in us,
 from where tomorrow the multiple will spring.
 Conquered nature, inside in bloom, outside devastated.
 Earth where I fall asleep, space where I wake up, who will come
 when you'll not be there anymore?
 What I will become is to me of an infinite warmth.

Char 1952, 74–80¹¹

Notes

- 1 Videos are accessible at: <https://vimeo.com/somosomo> and the photos at: <https://somosomo.co/artworks-2/>
- 2 *Zayū no mei* 座右の銘 (Desk Motto) meaning literally a word, an inscription you keep close to your right hand, the right side of your body.
- 3 Ima Tenko (今貂子), butoh dancer and choreographer based in Kyoto. Founder of the all-female butoh dance company *Kiraza* 綺羅座, she performs every Thursday since July 2016 her solo *Hisoku* at the Kyoto Butoh-kan (www.butohkan.jp).
- 4 Another English translation is available: see the part titled “Scribbled at the Theater: Ballets” in Barbara Johnson, *Divagations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).
- 5 Photos by Eikoh Hosoe, published in *The Butterfly's Dream* (Kyoto: Seigensha, 2006).
- 6 Photos by Eikoh Hosoe, published in *A World of Eikoh Hosoe, Spherical Dualism of Photography* (Kyoto: Seigensha, 2006).
- 7 Titles: *Nemureru Bijo / Sleeping Beauty* – 2009, *Yumi / The bow* – 2011, *Koma / The Chapter* – 2014, *Mononoke Hime / Princess Monster*–2015.
- 8 Titles: *The Nine Sisters* – 2006, *Elephantine* – 2008, *Dead Space / Eurydice* – 2009, *Palladium Apparel / Shinayakana Kemono* – 2010, *Yumi* – 2011, *Somosomo* – 2014.
- 9 Here, I think about this other text by Michel Foucault, *Utopian Body* or *Le Corps Utopique* (1966) (Paris: Éditions Lignes, 2009). Note that there is an English version available in Caroline A. Jones (ed.), *Sensorium: Embodied Experience, Technology and Contemporary Art* (Cambridge/London: MIT Press, 2006): 229–234.
- 10 For reference:
Ghost in the Shell, Mamoru Oshii (1995)
In Praise of Shadows (陰翳礼讃, *In'ei raisan*), Junichiro Tanizaki (1933)
The Empire of Signs, Roland Barthes (1970)
Madame Chrysanthème, Pierre Loti (1888)
- 11 Note that another English version is available in James R. Lawler, *René Char: The Myth and the Poem* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978).

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