

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

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An Empty Room:

Butoh Performance and the Social Body in Crisis

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
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in Culture and Performance

by

Michael Andrew Y. Sakamoto

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Butoh Performance and the Social Body in Crisis

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Doctor of Philosophy in Culture and Performance

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Professor Allen F. Roberts, Chair

What is the generative potential of butoh, a cluster of performative practices that began as radical a half-century ago in Japan and now performed by thousands of practitioners worldwide? Do core principles remain that may yet be employed to engender new approaches that build upon butoh's practical foundations and are appropriate for contemporary social urgencies in the early 21st Century? If *crisis* is the fundamental concept around which butoh practices revolve, can a butoh-based discourse inform modes of crisis resolution in other arenas such as health, environment, economy, or politics?

Butoh was originally framed by oppositional binaries defined by essentialized Japanese and Western cultural identities and a social imaginary inspired by dark tales of butoh founder Hijikata Tatsumi's allegedly rural childhood in northern Japan. We may now view this as a paradigmatic frame for activating what Hijikata called the *body in crisis* to instigate social

thought and crisis resolution and thereby inspire individuals, groups, communities, or society at large. I frame butoh, therefore, as a process of subjectively engaging, embodying, and expressing chaos, contradiction, and crisis for the purpose of psycho-physiological and/or psycho-social resolution and transformation.

In this dissertation, I begin with elements of postwar Japanese art and culture from which butoh drew inspiration to become a recursive socio-political practice rooted in subjectively imagined embodiments. I then redefine and recontextualize butoh's core principles in the context of the theoretical constructs of *desire*, *trickster*, and the *cultural commons*. I conclude by applying this theory to contemporary discourses of *democracy* and *sustainability* in terms of performative, interpersonal, and intercultural behavior.

The dissertation of Michael Andrew Y. Sakamoto is approved.

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## Biography

Michael Sakamoto is an interdisciplinary artist, educator, and scholar. His performances and visual and media works have been presented in 13 countries in Asia, Europe, and North America. He has been a guest artist and lecturer at numerous universities, colleges, and communities since 1999 and published in academic journals since 2009. Michael has received many academic and arts grants and fellowships, including from the Asian Cultural Council, Japan Foundation, Meet the Composer, James Irvine Foundation/DanceUSA, California Community Foundation, and others. He is currently on faculty in the MFA-Interdisciplinary Arts Program at Goddard College and the School of Theater at the California Institute of the Arts. Michael holds a Master of Fine Arts in Dance from the UCLA Department of World Arts and Cultures and a Bachelor of Arts from the UCLA Department of Communication Studies.

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **(MY) BUTOH**

A monastic asked Zen Master Judan of Longya, "When do the teachers of old get stuck?"  
Longya said, "When the thief slips into an empty room."

- from Eihei Dogen's Shobogenzo collection of 300 koans

"Who...are...you?"

- Tamano Hiroko on the definition of butoh

## **My, Not “I”**

We live in an age in which mass media has overwhelmed our daily lives. Beyond the electronic broadcast saturation and packaged, audio-visual experiences proliferating since the late 20th Century, dominant ideologies constantly invade our very bodies through socio-cultural and economic dependence on personal computers, mobile communication devices, and social media. The post-industrial, service-oriented, commodified body literally consumes its virtual self. We are eating our “selves” alive.

For these reasons, I believe that butoh performance is an attempt to save lives. It is a legislative bill put forward in a congress of mind, body, and spirit. It is a call to arms against our selves, the ones that we are not.

But what is the generative potential of butoh, a cluster of practices that began as radical a half-century ago in Japan but are now nominally accepted by the international art world? The first generation of butoh artists in the 1960s created social imaginaries and techniques for expressing them relevant to that historical moment and place. Do core principles remain, however, that may yet generate new approaches that build upon butoh’s practical foundations and are appropriate for contemporary social urgencies in the early 21st Century? More specifically—since I can best speak for myself—based on the fundamental principles that I have employed for my own butoh practice for 20 years, how might I frame a radicalized butoh practice and with what method might I realize it?

Answering such questions requires one to think not about what butoh is or has been but rather what it *can* be. If, as many have argued over the decades, *crisis* is the fundamental concept around which butoh-based practices revolve, then can a butoh-based discourse inform modes of *crisis resolution* in other arenas such as health, environment, economy, or politics? How can one

employ elements from butoh’s range of foundational concepts, forms, and techniques to devise a method for maintaining, not an avant-garde practice—in reality merely an initiatory phase—but the power of transformation over time?

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Hijikata Tatsumi, the founder of butoh, promulgated a belief that the body possesses inherent knowledge of its own needs and innate mechanisms for escaping, negotiating, and reimagining the conditions of life as it knows it. In butoh’s early days, this was framed as an opposition between an industrialized, late capitalist, Western body versus a pre-modern, Japanese body. Hijikata also framed each of these identities by a social imaginary inspired by materialistically routinized behavior in oppressive urban environments for the former and tall, dark tales of his allegedly rural childhood in the Tohoku region of northern Japan for the latter. We may now view this, however, as a paradigmatic frame, a way of aesthetically conceiving and corporeally activating what Hijikata called “the body in crisis” to instigate social thought and action within the postwar avant-garde of the 1960s and 1970s. Hijikata’s crisis body subsequently marked butoh practice as rooted in oppositional binaries, i.e. dialogic frameworks to resolve crisis, transform states of being, and thereby inspire or empower real individuals, groups, communities, or society at large.

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When a practice of art attains the status of orthodoxy, conditions are ripe for iconic figures to appear on the way to innovation and back again. What is not so obvious, however, are the motivations, instigations, and avenues through which innovation occurs. These elements often remain mysterious and abstruse until nearly the moment of innovation’s occurrence, which is the selfsame as its passing. The figure’s realization is also its death.

Hijikata was such a figure: deriving innovation from the detritus of marginalized identities left behind by the status quo, transitioning modern to postmodern, and always in danger of settling into an orthodoxy of his own creation. His milestones in the development of *butoh* can be seen as constantly approaching the immolation of his own circular thinking about art-life-death, an incessant becoming of his personally imagined *ankoku*—“utter darkness”—a pitch black well of being and nothingness from and into which any and all manner of selves and experiential frames arise and subside.<sup>1</sup> In his mid-career essay, “From Being Jealous of a Dog’s Vein” (1969), he expresses a desire for closeness with the matter of death:

I cherish wet animals and the bodies of the old, withered like dead trees, precisely because I believe that through them I may be able to come close to my desire. My body longs to be cut into pieces and to hide itself somewhere cold. I think that is, after all, the place to which I shall return and am certain that, frozen hard and about to fall down, what my eyes have seen there is simply an intimacy with things which continue to die their own deaths. (2000: 56-57)

Hijikata spent a great deal of time and effort fashioning an artistic persona through which to perform a seemingly endless stream of figurative deaths. This multitude of expressive variations, his life’s work, allowed Hijikata to present a broad lexicon of images, gestures, and “selves/bodies” that attempted to capture and present, in a Barthesian, *punctum*-like manner, his

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<sup>1</sup> Darkness as a metaphorical space of ineffable knowledge is a recurring metaphor in numerous philosophical and spiritual lineages. William C. Chittick, for example, identifies a similar concept in Sufi cosmology:

A single dreaming subject experiences a multiplicity of forms and things that in fact are nothing but his own single self. Their manyness is but the mode that the one consciousness assumes in displaying various facets of itself. . . . Existence as a whole. . . . is a *barzakh*, an intermediary realm between Being and nothingness. Hence existence as a whole can be called “imagination.” (1989: 15)

gradually accreted familiarity with life's challenges in the face of marginalization, abstraction, and objectification, as well as death.<sup>2</sup>

In Jacques Derrida's eulogistic essay, "The Deaths of Roland Barthes" (1980), the author speaks of his subject as having already attained death even in life, hence the title:

The proper name would have sufficed, for it alone and by itself says death, all deaths in one. It says death even while the bearer of it is still living. While so many codes and rites work to take away this privilege, because it is so terrifying, the proper name alone and by itself forcefully declares the unique disappearance of the unique—I mean the singularity of an unqualifiable death.... Death inscribes itself right in the name, but so as immediately to disperse itself there, so as to insinuate a strange syntax—in the name of only one to answer (as) many. (2001: 34)

Derrida speaks of death as final, incomplete, and unknowable until it is already upon us, and yet it is eternally with us in all we do, feel, and are. His essay, in a typically Barthesian manner, is a succession of short texts, each incomplete as a statement yet entirely dependent on what comes before and after. Such form is akin to one of Barthes's key topics, that of the "unary photograph," implicit and replete with both the definitive objectivity of *studium* and the prickly, evocative, and unknowable subjectivity of *punctum* (2001: 38-39).

Derrida's essay is fragmentary and incomplete in order that both subject and reader may complete it. Each section is both death and possibility for life. Each incomplete statement, by writ of its *desire* for the other, is definitively unanswerable, and yet each is also a plea, a

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<sup>2</sup> Speaking at the 1985 Butoh Festival in Tokyo, just months before his death, Hijikata stated: "I would like to make the dead gestures inside my body die one more time and make the dead themselves dead again. I would like to have a person who has already died die over and over inside my body. I may not know death, but it knows me" (2000: 77).

writhing, butoh-like grasp, begging the question of death's inevitability and the generative potential of the renewal that necessarily follows it.

Each chapter herein is written with a similar goal. My own developing approach to butoh is a continuation of what I believe Hijikata started, a *modus operandi* for cycling through the inexorability of life and death, of how to witness and experience one's reality and make of this understanding what is socio-politically possible.

## **My Writing**

As an ethnographic researcher who has been an artist influenced by butoh for over two decades and a performer for 17 years, I take my first experiences of butoh—encountering a photobook in 1991, attending a performance in 1993, and dancing since 1995—as central metaphors of my 20-year engagement with the practice. Throughout this dissertation, I refer to these and other experiences, thoughts, and feelings, checking in with my past, present, and future selves; my thinking body, dancing mind, and living spirit; or, as I refer to it in the title to this Introduction, *(my) butoh*.

Moreover, I am faced with contextualizing my multiple voices. One is authoritative and third person but occasionally bleeding into the first person, while another is first person but occasionally making claims to the third. My aim is resolution, not through forced integration but implicit via juxtaposition. Each voice tells its own story and thereby makes its own confessions about positionality, “truth,” and “lies.” My epistemology embraces the paradox of equating authority and subjectivity with both fiction and truth. Operating together, the latter pair dialectically feed an expressive mode of subjecting one's being to being one's subject, charging the auto-ethnographer as *observer-participant*.

My methods are influenced not only by butoh practice but also broader issues, including what it means to be an artist and scholar. The prevalent hybrid term is “artist-scholar,” with academia placing primacy on “scholar” as the latter term, the noun that circumscribes the wholeness of the adjectival referent’s being. Likewise with the ethnographic term, “participant-observer,” placing primacy on “observer.” In both terms, the emphasis is on verbalized thought, language, separateness, and objectivity. By inverting each binary, however, emphasis may be placed on creation, embodiment, non-duality, and subjectivity. “Scholar-artist” and “observer-participant” are more aligned with my intellectual and personal values and more factual in my case.

Thus, the epistemological principle of first-hand knowledge implicit in such terms guides my methodology of *observer-participation* and *research-based practice*. Instead of the text-centric and positivist *maintaining-distance-while-moving-in* of participant-observation and practice-based research, observer-participation and research-based practice posit a *widening-of-view-while-moving-in* as well as an *active* position within the observed and researched practice itself. I am a participant who yet observes and a practitioner who also analyzes.

Already a quarter century ago, writers like James Clifford, Stephen Tyler, and Vincent Crapanzano, among many others, made clear that such a dialectic was not merely a convenient conceit for adventurous or indecisive writers but inherent within the nature of ethnography itself. As Clifford stated, “These objects and epistemological grounds are now appearing as constructs, achieved fictions, containing and domesticating heteroglossia” (1988: 95). So while not purposefully telling lies about my “story,” my hope is that the heteroglossia of “data” on which I base my assertions does achieve some of the persuasive sensitivity of good fiction in its ability to depict the often startling and transformative ambiguity of artists’ practices. As Clifford

described, “If this ethnographic self-fashioning presupposes lies of omission and of rhetoric, it also makes possible the telling of powerful truths” (1998: 112). Or, as Bruce Baird notes about Hijikata, “As he progressed, he was to take more and more seriously the idea of self-fashioning, communicating with different types of people, and being instantly at home in many worlds” (2012: 73).

To underscore this point, we need look no further than the butoh community. Butoh means many things to many practitioners—let alone viewers—begging the question of why one should even use the word. For dancer Tanaka Min, Hijikata was the only true butoh artist (Tanaka 2009). Dancer Oguri asserts that butoh was less an artform than an artistic movement that ended a quarter century ago (Oguri 2010). Dancer Katsura Kan says butoh is whatever you need it to be to move your practice forward (Kan 2010). My only definite answer is to say that I cannot escape “it.” Even when I see performers whose work I think is not very good, there is often some unexplainable, inarticulate, ineffable quality of physicality, energy, gravity, or life force. When I see photos of Hijikata, my mind expands. When I see Ohno Kazuo—Hijikata’s own dance inspiration and a prime force throughout the first 51 years of butoh—I want to grow old, know pain, and feel love. When I spend time with my butoh artist colleagues—my friends, my soulmates—I feel more at home than in my own hometown.

### **It Is What It Is**

Beyond this discussion, the fact remains that the word “butoh” has, for better or worse, stuck. It is used by countless artists, critics, and audiences all over the globe. Just like “jazz” and “modern dance,” butoh *happened* and is now becoming whatever it can or needs to be according to the amalgam of individual and social contexts through which it circulates and develops, creating a

potent brew of communal mythology and heated debate. From mind-shifting improvisation that comes and goes like a barely-witnessed, flash flood to pale, commodified tableaux vivants drained of anything remotely challenging to the audience, butoh is all over the map.

I will leave splitting hairs to others who are better equipped and more patient than I to parse through the vast sea of esoteric criteria of form, technique, history, culture, and identity accumulated for over the decades. My goals are both more personal and more social. Ultimately, I don't really care what butoh is. What matters to me is why it exists, what social forces led to its inception and ongoing development, and what purpose it can serve from now into the future. Thus, this "it" is exactly what I hope to reveal and even, if necessary, *invent*.

With this approach in mind, my definition of butoh is practical, philosophical, and theoretical. I frame butoh as *a process of subjectively engaging, embodying, and expressing chaos, contradiction, and crisis for the purpose of psycho-physiological and/or psycho-social resolution and transformation*. This is very much my own definition and not one that I have previously read, encountered, or discussed. It is designed to encompass butoh's myriad histories, practices, and values as well as initiate the direction of my thesis.

My goal is to theorize a method for comprehending, discussing, and contributing to the eventual resolution of any number of the aforementioned crises. In Chapter 1, I lay out the relevant history of postwar Japanese art and culture within which butoh arose and from which it drew fundamental inspiration. In Chapter 2, I draw on butoh's long relationship with photography to reveal butoh as a recursive socio-political practice rooted in subjectively imagined embodiments. Chapter 3 begins the work of reimagining butoh by redefining and recontextualizing its principles beyond the confines of its historical roots, laying out the core concepts of a theory I call, after the koan which opened this introduction, *an empty room*.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 explore respectively the three primary elements of the theory: *desire*, *trickster*, and the *cultural commons*.

I conclude Chapter 6 and the dissertation by proposing the basis for application of this theory to contemporary discourses of *democracy* and *sustainability*, which I engage in terms of performance and interpersonal behavior. Butoh-based performance may serve as metaphorical inspiration for and practical embodiment of a process by which: 1.) desires are addressed, 2.) potentialized being is manifested, 3.) communal space is activated, and 4.) a diverse social dialogue occurs. Of all the fundamental concepts that this dissertation's theories point toward, I believe democracy and sustainability are the most emblematic and representative of its civic agenda for individual and collective empowerment.

I should also state that I do not necessarily anticipate being successful in reaching my goal. Just like the Four Great Vows in Zen—to save all sentient beings, forsake all desires, master the dharma, and attain the Buddha way—actually manifesting the democratic and sustainable body through butoh practice may not be achievable.<sup>3</sup> If we think of such bodies as ideal states of being, they may be contradictions in terms. If, however, we approach them as mutable, ever-manifesting processes tumbling through disparate, dialogic permutations, I believe there is an opportunity for uncovering butoh's generative nature for contemporary society.

Moreover, the practical driving force of my project is a “performance” of my thesis based in the belief that one can only answer this inquiry through embodiment—to do in principle what

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<sup>3</sup> From Zen Center of Los Angeles's Four Vows class:  
Sentient beings are numberless, I vow to save them  
Desires are inexhaustible, I vow to put an end to them  
The Dharmas are boundless, I vow to master them  
The Buddha way is unsurpassable, I vow to attain it  
(2010: 5)

other butoh artists have done before and what many artists have stated to me in my research over the years; namely, *find your own butoh*.

Or, as I once witnessed a Zen teacher advise to someone anxious about how to resolve suffering, negativity, evil, and attachment, "*Become the thing itself*" (Kahn 2007).

**CHAPTER 1**  
**DEVELOPING A PRACTICE**

*A flashback to the beginning. My beginning...*

*Fall 1991. Kinokuniya Bookstore, Downtown Los Angeles.*

*All I can think is that this man is in pain. There's a large book in my hands with a cover photo that I don't understand. An old Japanese man holds a flower, twisted and bent, petals shriveled. His arms and hands curl inward to his concave chest. His shoulder droops low, withering. Twisted, asymmetrical, chaotic, his body struggles to stay upright. White makeup covers his body in patches, as if lived in too long. Bright red lipstick and yellowed teeth, mouth only half-open but somehow feeling agape, as if he has something to say, but instead of coming out through his mouth, the words are oozing, bleeding through pores all over his body.*

*Over the eyelids, smears of sky blue, desperate for attention, not rooted in attraction, but in pity, a long-lost desire to be someone's queen for a day, an hour, a minute even, an inexorable slide into decay. And those eyes. Surrounded by pure black, thick and messy streaks trailing off to the side, simultaneously hopeful and despairing. He's looking upward, longing, resigned, saintly.*

*It's obvious. He's dying. You're not supposed to watch this kind of thing happening. I can't keep my eyes off of him. Other people in the store are beginning to stare at me staring at this book.*

*I've never seen anything so beautiful...*

That's what I felt then. I look at this photo now, 21 years later and 18 years after becoming a butoh artist, and I notice how staged it is. The curve of the flower petals perfectly matching the arc of the lips, the fall of the hair, and the center point in the frame. No tension in the large hands. The dancer's pose seems static, as if tailored and held for the camera. There is still, however, that expression.

Ohno Kazuo sees something. Heaven or God perhaps, since he is a devout Christian, opening wide to take in the breath of angels? Or maybe a ghost, a lost or kindred soul that fills him with childlike awe and aged exhaustion? I still feel a visceral, potentialized space opening up every time I see this photo. Ohno appears to me intimidated by and anxious for what comes next. For me, the photo engenders a sense of *liminality*.

I may, however, be imposing my own predilections upon the image. In considering whether a photo is acting upon me or I am acting upon it, I recall that the very first photographers in history held competing desires to either passively observe or actively depict reality. What one may assume is a conscious decision made by every photographer is instead an existential question that vexes artists and scholars to this day.

This passive/active binary is at the core of Roland Barthes's final book, *Camera Lucida* (1980), in which he defines the act of viewing photos through the binary of *studium* and *punctum*. He defines *studium* as the impression of a photo based on its generalizable criteria; the collective references available within the place and time of an image; and its alleged set of cultural, political, aesthetic, scientific, or otherwise objective facts. Moreover, because *studium* is external, it impresses, even imposes, itself upon us: "The Photograph is violent...because on each occasion *it fills the sight by force*, and because in it nothing can be refused or transformed"

(1981: 91). Conversely, arriving ambiguously within our being in as a “wound,” “prick,” “little hole,” or “cast of the dice,” punctum arises from our imagination:

Nothing surprising, then, if sometimes, despite its clarity, the *punctum* should be revealed only after the fact, when the photograph is no longer in front of me and I think back on it. I may know better a photograph I remember than a photograph I am looking at, as if direct vision oriented its language wrongly, engaging it in an effort of description which will always miss its point of effect, the *punctum*. (1981: 53)

Punctum incites memory to act as a template upon which current desires, anxieties, or other emotions may reflect. This potential for particular effects upon particular viewers makes every instance of punctum idiosyncratic and entirely subjective. In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard speaks of the power of this type of effect—essentially, of poetry on psycho-physiological consciousness—to the point that it alters the individual’s lifelong perception of the worldly qualities that an image may possess:

Great images have both a history and a prehistory; they are always a blend of memory and legend, with the result that we never experience an image directly. Indeed, every great image has an unfathomable oneiric depth to which the personal past adds special color. Consequently, it is not until late in life that we really revere an image, when we discover that its roots plunge well beyond the history that is fixed in our memories. (1994: 33)

Bachelard writes that dream-like images are unfathomable because they are unanswerable, a fact that is rooted, just as Barthes’s punctum, in the images’ adherence to a purely internal logic and their potential for particularity, which cannot be anticipated:

When I receive a new poetic image, I experience its quality of inter-subjectivity. I know that I am going to repeat it in order to communicate my enthusiasm. When considered in transmission from one soul to another, it becomes evident that a poetic image eludes causality. Doctrines that are timidly causal, such as psychology, or strongly causal, such as psychoanalysis, can hardly determine the ontology of what is poetic. (1994: xxiv)

While *Camera Lucida* is ostensibly a meditation on photography's meaning and function, the book is ultimately driven by Barthes's mourning around the death of his mother, with whom he had lived most of his life, making the text an intricately reasoned and deeply sorrowful exploration of *subjective truth* as a way to deal with objective reality.

With the prevalence of subjective expressive forms in the post-World War Two Japanese avant-garde, a similar tension arose in the formative years of butoh. The first butoh artists were like the first jazz artists: they felt that they had something to reclaim and a struggle worth fighting because they had been handed a false liberty. In the midst of Japan's rapid Westernization, they took to reimagining and retooling the performing body and the very self that it represented. Hijikata Tatsumi, butoh's creator and primary driving force in its formative decades, led a symbolic expedition into Japan's pre-modern past to excavate and salvage the image of a broken, dying, nativist body and turn it into something that it already was: a myth.

*Kinjiki (Forbidden Colors)*, Hijikata's sexually violent performance with Ohno Yoshito, premiered in 1959. Titled after a Mishima Yukio novel, the performance featured the 21 year-old Ohno, son of butoh co-founder Ohno Kazuo, strangling a chicken between his legs and Hijikata attempting to molest him.<sup>4</sup> Now legendary, *Kinjiki* was the declaration of independence, first

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<sup>4</sup> Mishima Yukio was one of postwar Japan's most acclaimed novelists and playwrights and an increasingly staunch nationalist during his career. He also wrote short stories, poetry, and librettos and directed a short film in 1966, *Patriotism*, in which he plays a soldier forced by

salvo, and forbidden fruit of the butoh movement. Such histories settle into a collective imaginary that the members of that collective sooner or later take for granted. They become myth.

Notorious for giving contradictory accounts about himself, Hijikata spent much of his life spinning tales that fed his public persona. In the decade following *Kinjiki*, he became who he wanted to be or needed to be, what others wanted from him, or all of the above. He also was not the only one playing this game. Countless other subversive artists of the period around the world, such as Terayama Shuji, Jean-Luc Godard, Bob Dylan, or Andy Warhol, just to name a few, spent the late 1950s through mid-1960s dissecting and then rejecting the totalizing authority of their late Modernist forefathers. Eventually running out of “tricks,” they were then forced to make positive statements—to actually *say* something—by the late 1960s, when, after exploding onto their respective scenes, they each imploded within a scene of their own making.

Of course, looking back to a time when I was just born, in a culture once removed and a country an ocean away, is an act of imagination, like staring into a faded magic lantern image or straining my ear into a broken harmonium, an attempt to communicate with the beyond—but one that always already resides within oneself—to find out where and how the past and future live in the here and now.

In other words, *You weren't there, Michael. How could you possibly know what you're talking about?*

I don't. That's the point.

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circumstance to commit suicide by *seppuku* (ritual disembowelment). Four years later, Mishima committed *seppuku* in real life after leading a failed coup attempt to exhort the military into returning to an emperor-centered martial government.

## **Another flashback, another beginning...**

*October 2, 1993, Los Angeles*

*I receive a phone call from Rachel Rosenthal, a well-known performance artist whom I am helping with video documentation of her latest work.*

*“I have two extra tickets for you and your wife to see Kazuo Ohno tonight,” she says, with a delightful gravity. “He’s an amazing dancer and considered one of the great masters in Japan. You can’t miss it.”<sup>5</sup>*

*The seats are perfect, tenth row center. The curtain drawn, house lights up, stage bare. The faint, dreamlike sound of Maria Callas singing an aria from “Manon Lescaut” is heard, and an 86 year-old Japanese man slowly stands up from an aisle seat in the audience, dressed as a woman in a formal cape, an old silvery, party dress, wide-brimmed hat, and white makeup from head to toe. He is like a specter of both a 19th Century opera diva and a male prostitute.*

*Ohno slowly makes his way towards the proscenium, hesitating along the way, looking back at the audience and the space around him, or rather looking through those things, searching out hidden ghosts, or maybe unsure whether he is one himself. After reaching the stage, he sheds the outer layers of his costume, methodically, like a snake molting its skin, leaving it laid out on the ground, a corpse-like shadow of himself, and proceeds to perform a slow, gasping dance of death and rebirth to Bach’s iconic “Tocatta and Fugue in D Minor.” Ohno exits and returns dressed simply in black dancer shorts and dress shoes, his white, ashen body now exposed. He dances in front of a grand piano in an expression of pure spirit, an energized blank slate, first in silence and then to excerpts from Bach’s “Well-Tempered Clavier.”*

*In the second half of the show, Ohno returns carrying the spirit of Antonia Merce, known as La Argentina, an early 20th Century, Spanish-Argentinian dancer who is his inspiration for the performance. He dances through a succession of tango music numbers and alternately severe and ornate costumes, overtly blending the mixed-heritage dance influences of La Argentina (tango and flamenco) as well as his own (prewar German Expressionism and postwar butoh). The piece ends with Ohno dressed in a white ruffled gown, depicting decay as well as youthful innocence, dancing to Puccini’s “O Mio Babbino Caro,” written from the point of view of a teenage girl but sung on the recording here by Maria Callas, that most quintessential and deep-throated of grown woman sopranos.<sup>6</sup>*

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<sup>5</sup> Much later, after I’ve spent six years as a young performer in Rachel’s theater company, She has commented to me many times that this whole “butoh thing,” which I keep chasing after outside of my work with her, is just a phase I’m going through and that I shouldn’t get too carried away with it. “It’s not for everyone, and you have more potential as an artist than just being a dancer,” she states, matter-of-factly. I reminded her recently, however, as I did then, that it was all her fault in the first place.

<sup>6</sup> This description is based on both my experience as a viewer and descriptive passages from Ohno Kazuo and Ohno Yoshito’s book, *Kazuo Ohno’s World: from without and within* (2004).

*I can't breathe, or stop smiling. I'm welled up with tears, but so is half the audience.*

*Adopted by my parents as a baby, I was raised an only child and never experienced the sensation of knowing that I resembled another person. But that night, for the first time, I saw myself in another human being.*

## Subjectivity and Crisis in Postwar Japan

Japan's 20th Century history of mutating identities through imperial expansion, wartime destruction, and postwar reconstruction set the stage for butoh's initial developments. The movement was influenced by broader engagements in Japanese arts and culture with, overtly, a radical and holistic *subjectivity*—characterized by both inward and outward manifestations—and, by implication, *crisis*. Subjectivity as a cultural movement, aesthetic style, and thematic concept is also fundamentally dialectic, requiring an objectifying, positivist, or otherwise authoritarian position to act or feel *against*. Speaking in 1968, the same year that Hijikata staged *Hijikata Tatsumi to Nihonjin: Nikutai no Hanran (Hijikata Tatsumi and the Japanese: Revolt of the Flesh)*, his performative diatribe against Western cultural imperialism, Jacques Derrida echoed the implicitly hierarchical nature of postwar Japanese artists' subjective positionalities via his concept of *différance*, the “systematic play” and “spacing” of differences and traces between oppositional entities (2004: 25). The dynamic within which differences operate determines the nature and consequences of such positionalities in a politico-economic sense:

Subjectivity—like objectivity—is an effect of *différance*, an effect inscribed in a system of *différance*. The *a* of *différance* also recalls that spacing is temporization, the detour and postponement by means of which intuition, perception, consummation—in a word, the relationship to the present, the reference to a present reality, to a being—are always deferred. Deferred by virtue of the very principle of difference which holds that an element functions and signifies, takes on or conveys meaning, only by referring to another past or future element in an economy of traces. (2004: 25)

In Derrida's terms, just as an “economy of traces” was evident in the contrast between the shards of war devastation that littered Japan's physical and mental landscape and Western-styled

elements of the postwar reconstruction, so an expressivity rooted in “intuition, perception, consummation” was exactly what so many postwar Japanese artists adopted as their *métier* for declaration of recursive being.

I also engage postwar Japanese history through the use of binary frames of analysis to explore the arts and cultural movements around subjective perspective and of autobiography as a modality in multiple expressivities that addressed Japanese society’s postwar identity crisis. I examine artists from *butoh*, photography, and “new wave” cinema and others in theater and literature and, most specifically, explore the politico-aesthetics of the avant-garde milieu to shed light on *butoh*’s intertwined artistic legacies in dance and photography.

One binary frame is psychoanalyst Doi Takeo’s concept of *omote* connected with *ura*, or outer and inner essence in Japanese culture (2001). In classical Japanese, *omote* is the outer “face” or “mask” of a person or group, whereas *ura* is the mind, heart, or soul—who they “really” are. Doi asserts that these two concepts become one entity in practice through their inherent usage in the Japanese language: “We speak of the *omote-ura* of things, referring to the two sides of everything. . . . Even when we use them separately, one term implies the other: to speak of *omote* is to speak of *ura*; to speak of *ura* is to speak of *omote*” (2001: 23). In other words, “*Omote* is what expresses *ura*. Perhaps we could even say that *ura* performs *omote*,” or “*Omote* and *ura* do not exist separately but, conjoined, form a single existence. The distinction between them arises from a recognition of this single existence” (Doi 2001: 26). Literary scholar Jane Gallop, in describing the unresolvable finality of her writing, uses the term *cohabitation*, a textual-existential phenomenon characterized by an “irreducible doubleness” that, in Hegelian terms, defies synthesis while yet embodying both thesis and antithesis (Gallop and Blau 2003: 18).

Carol F. Sorgenfrei points to Sakabe Megumi's theory that the inseparable *omote* and *ura* entity may also be one end of another binary with *kage* ("shadow" or "reflection"), a concept that heightens identity as something paradoxically false and genuine (Sorgenfrei 2005: 10). Michele Marra explains these elements in Sakabe's theory as two sides of the same visualized object:

The presence of a self as "surface" (*omote*, meaning both "mask" and "face") implies the existence of a structure of "reciprocity" (*sogosei*) and "reversibility" (*kagyakusei*) that problematizes the visual self as "something that is seen by others, that sees itself, and that sees itself as other." This latter definition applies to both the mask and the face, depriving them of the justificatory ground for positing any kind of differentiation. (2002: 231)

If each person, in other words, is composed of conjoined inner and outer selves but without a single integrated self visible from any perspective, then every aspect of such an entity is only knowable via implication, allusion, or inference.

Numerous postwar artists were also inspired by themes of *mother* and *home*. After the war, with the very definitions of authority and belonging on unstable ground, Japan's insular and tightly-controlled institutional structures—now suspended ambivalently between a pre-war, Confucian-inspired patriarchy and postwar revival of a matriarchal presence in daily life—provided ready fodder for innovative creators to invent new modes of expression and reflection.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Halldór Stefánsson points out that pre-war Japanese society's commitment to collective cohesion and hierarchical authority, when combined with the limited but genuine postwar reorganization of gender relations that gave women increased agency, allowed for matriarchal social structures to take greater hold in the domestic sphere, even while broader elements of social cohesion—commerce, government, and the imperial household—maintained a patriarchal hold:

The manifold changes that have transformed Japanese society and culture post-war have made Japanese women the absolute controllers of everything relating to the domestic sphere of life in the country. Family finances, children's education, consumption, community affairs, all these practical aspects of life are now, for the most part, run and dominated by housewives in Japan. (1998: 161)

I also consider Victor Turner's concept of *social drama* as an aid in seeing how certain social progressions in Japan have interrelated. Turner observed that societies are often characterized by alternating states of identity and liminality and experience four general stages: *breach* (a break in normative social order), *crisis* (imbalance and a liminal state outside of normative order), *redress* (regaining balance and clarity), and *reintegration* (restoration of balance but to a new social order, except in the case of *schism*) (1995: 33-44).

Applying this structural frame to Japan in the decades before, during, and after World War Two, we can identify two interrelated cycles. The first, instigated by Japan's rapidly expanding imperialist ambitions in the early years of the Showa Era (1925-1989), may be identified as follows: *breach*—unilateral Japanese military aggression in Asia from 1931; *crisis*—World War Two with the entry of the United States and its allies into the Pacific War in 1941; *redress*—Japanese defeat in 1945; *reintegration*—postwar occupation and socio-political restructuring. These events overlapped with and led to a second cycle of “Japanese culture” shifts characterized by: *breach*—war defeat; *crisis*—the American Occupation (1945-1952); *redress*—search for identity in the 1950s to 1960s; and *reintegration*—nominal stabilization of mainstream Japanese identity since the 1970s.

D. P. Martinez speaks of the outcome of this recent history as one of myth-production around modern Japanese identity, on the one hand propagated by Japanese society itself and on the other readily perpetuated by Westerners through the consumption of Japanese popular culture (e.g. anime, television programs, toys, and the tourist gaze) and circulated in simplistic and exotic forms in a global marketplace dominated by the Western media industry (1998: 2-3). The abiding dominance of Euro-American culture inside and outside Japan continues to affect not only how others see Japan but also how many Japanese view themselves. This interplay of

cultural dynamics gave birth to much of postwar Japanese art and laid the aesthetic groundwork for later Japanese artists in the domestic and international spheres. While the lived coherence of contemporary Japanese society is a matter of much debate, my primary concern is to see how certain persons and groups made innovative attempts to “redress” and “reintegrate” themselves and others by inventing a variety of expressive strategies—mythical, realist, or otherwise—for revealing and reconstituting identity, thereby influencing art and cultural history in the process.

### **Early Postwar Period**

*“Around that time, I first heard the word “democracy.” As our defeat marked a turning point, traditional values were completely altered and the reality of life quickly changed. I lost my belief in everything. The only things that I believed were the things I could touch and the things that I saw with my own eyes.”*

– Photographer Tomatsu Shomei (2006: 30)

In Fall 1945, U.S. military forces quickly took up positions throughout Japan as the designers and overseers of a postwar Japanese government. With Japan’s military infrastructure destroyed by Allied bombing and its leaders excised from authority, civilian, royalist, and industrial influences rose quickly to fill the vacuum. Petty bureaucrats and *zaibatsu* (industrial oligarchies) secured administrative, financial, and commercial monopolies in government ministries, factory production, and services catering to domestic markets and the large-scale, foreign occupying force. With the additional retention of the Imperial House by U.S. authorities as a tool for maintaining key elements of an unquestioning social order and keeping extreme political parties in check, as well as another arm in the campaign to bulwark against Soviet Communism, Japan’s

national power structures for the following decades were set in place by the end of the Occupation in 1952. America had created a satellite within its own shadow, a nation nominally reestablished on principles of personal freedom, democracy, and “openness” as well as the potential for economic prosperity, but also by decree and monopolistic design with the rigidity of Japanese society’s royalist, business, and government hierarchies largely intact (Dower 1999; Koschmann 1996).

Others, including many democratic activists and left-wing radicals, saw this new social structure as simply another imperial colony in everything but name. In the chaotic, poverty-filled years immediately after the war, with the heretofore clearly-defined, national identity now eviscerated, Modern and contemporary artists felt the need to work out where in this new world they belonged. Peter Grilli cites a vast “existential dilemma” facing the populace, to which artists of the day responded by developing “styles and languages of expression” that were especially “austere, desiccated, and severe” (2007: 9).

Even old guard mainstream artists, such as photographer Domon Ken and film director Mizoguchi Kenji, were fundamentally affected by this environment. From the 1930s to 1960s, Domon was Japan’s preeminent modern photographer and a tireless advocate of an activist humanism. While promoting an explicitly universalist aesthetic of “Realism” and rejecting subjective art and criticism focused solely on the individual, he nevertheless posited the independent, personal, and poetic *geijutsuka* (“fine artist”) as the kind of photographer who can make a difference:

To depict a societal reality, the photographer himself is already equipped—in his very person—with the absolutely unstaged snapshot, for which the camera mechanism provides the ideal vehicle. He is not a painter, a poet, a novelist, or a performer, but a

*geijutsuka*-“photographer,” whose work has embedded within it the potential to be the sole creative method that can truly contribute to society. (2006: 24-25)

Likewise, Mizoguchi was one of the most commercially and critically successful Japanese filmmakers since the silent era whose style tended toward straightforward, gently subtle depictions of social tensions. Nevertheless, his films in the immediate postwar period display a haunted gravitas and personal anger directed against the utterly demoralizing conditions that he witnessed his fellow citizens enduring. His 1948 film, “Women of the Night,” depicts a hellish Tokyo where even the most chaste, faithful, and well-meaning women fall easy prey to corruption, prostitution, disease, and death. Despite its critical and commercial success, Mizoguchi later swore off the film, labeling it “‘barbarous’ and the result ‘of the overpowering sense of resentment I’d accumulated during the long years of wartime repression’” (Koresky 2008).

Explicitly emblematic of a radical subjectivity in this period were writers such as Tamura Taijiro and Dazai Osamu, whose melodramatic yet poignant tales of rootlessness, lust, and decadence raised the “I-novel,” a genre of autobiographical fiction begun in early 20th Century Japan, to new levels of cultural and political engagement as well as self-absorption (Dower 1999: 148-167). These writers and other creative iconoclasts were the denizens of what came to be known as *kasutori* culture, named after the cheap shochu liquor that they drank, which “flourished into the 1950s and left a gaudy legacy of escapism, titillation, and outright sleaze—a commercial world dominated by sexually oriented entertainments and a veritable cascade of pulp literature” (Dower 1999: 148). They promulgated a cynical, enervating sense of disillusionment and despair amidst the horrors of postwar devastation while thumbing their noses at authority and absorbing themselves in a solipsistic lifestyle of sex, alcohol, and “free expression.”

Conversely, the writers working in and around the journal *Kindai bungaku* (*Modern Literature*) also placed a high value on realism, but with an attempt to imagine a more visionary and positive paradigm. While challenging the objectivizing tendencies of the Japanese Communist Party, to which they were partially aligned and which was pushing for democratic revolution, the *Kindai bungaku* group “was largely responsible for focusing the attention of postwar intellectuals on the practical ideals of individual autonomy, humanism, and modernity as components of the democratic revolutionary process” (Koschmann 1991: 164). Such writers were also involved in Japanese postwar culture’s move toward a more reflexive corporeality and identity:

Critics in the group...developed a dialectical style of thought and expression and an affinity for imagery related to the body, the ego, and the void that resonated with major themes in postwar fiction. They also appealed to European ideals of autonomous selfhood in their self-critical attempts to come to terms with the war responsibility and the postwar emperor system. (Koschmann 1991: 64)

In many aspects, by giving voice to Japan’s social desolation and anguish, writers like those in the *kasutori* and *Kindai bungaku* movements established a thematic and creative template for the avant-garde artists who would come to prominence years later. One aspect was a general *search for identity* within an environment of widespread social ambiguity, a phenomenon largely instigated by a culture clash between the Western Occupation Authority’s nominally egalitarian value structure and Japan’s vertically rigid social order. While paying lip service to democratic ideals of an empowered citizenry, the Occupation Authority’s attitude toward Japanese customs of daily life and interpersonal relations that existed before 1945 was characterized largely by misunderstanding and dismissal. Through “democratization by decree,” the Americans “tended

to reinforce the unfortunate ‘logic of irresponsibility’ whereby everyone was socialized to bow to orders from superiors” (Dower 1999: 71). This task was accomplished through many public relations channels, such as newspaper articles written by the U.S. military’s General Headquarters (GHQ) personnel and numerous books intended for a broad domestic audience detailing and praising Western democratic values and consumer culture. These publications were released by Japanese publishing houses, but under GHQ’s “consultation” and strict supervision.

The most influential of these projects was anthropologist Ruth Benedict’s seminal book, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1948). While supposedly intended as a tool for increasing mutual understanding between the domestic and occupying cultures, it also served to reify the assumed superiority of American individualist culture while perpetuating stereotypes of Japanese collective authority:

Benedict’s book demands that the Japanese become, not Americans, but in effect, anthropologists; it demands that the Japanese learn to view their culture with a certain scientific detachment and see their received values as relative and therefore open to revision in the service of consciously chosen ends. Ultimately, the imperial vision of Benedict’s “world made safe for differences” lies not in any covert imposition of American values on the Japanese but in the overt and uncompromising call for the subordination of all cultures to the demands of individual choice. (Shannon 2004: 70-71)

A best-seller in both the U.S. and Japan (and still in print 64 years later), Benedict’s book was a popular factor in Japan’s large-scale, cultural identity shift. By the mid-1950s, most urban Japanese, even if wearing “traditional” clothes at home, donned Western clothes outside, nominally espoused capitalist economic values, and readily consumed foreign-styled, commercial goods.

A second element of creativity from this period was the use of *subjectivity* as a reaction to this crisis. Surrounded on all sides by desolation, corruption, and foreign authority, many saw no choice but to retreat within. In an era of enforced democracy and individual liberties, artists, social critics, and philosophers wondered out loud about the sudden ambivalence of the self in relation to the collective, a position not only given to egoism, as in the case of the *kasutori* writers, but inspired by social justice and egalitarianism:

In a postwar era of “Enlightenment,” when Japan was often believed to be completing its modernization, it is not surprising that separation between public and private should have been considered the hallmark of modernity. Yet...the politics of democratic revolution took place at many levels, and democratic subjectivity appeared in the midst of civil society in a variety of local contexts, including schools, workshops, universities, and rural cooperatives. It is instructive to remember that recent conceptions of democratic revolution tend to define as political the very process of subject-formation itself, as it takes place through and within the social realm. (Koschmann 1996:232)

A third thematic element was a *focus on the body*. Previous to 1945, Japanese citizens were expected to be concerned with understanding themselves completely, including body and spirit, in terms of collective society and as part of the *kokutai*, the national, Emperor-centric body, to which all citizens, either implicitly or explicitly, swore allegiance in life and death (Dower 1999: 157). As J. Victor Koschmann explains, postwar Japanese efforts towards a broad civil democracy was inherently and permanently stifled by the Occupation Authority’s maintenance of the Emperor as Japanese society’s figurehead and nominal head of state (1996: 11-13). With reference to political scientist Yamaguchi Jiro’s analysis of the function of Japan’s imperial institution, Koschmann emphasizes that America’s democratization by decree was the

replacement of one holistic prescription for social behavior with a different but just as all-encompassing system that eroded genuine democratic behavior: “By evoking a pre-political general will, it trivializes processes for the formation of a practical political will; by evoking a substantial, communal order, it helps suppress the social difference and contingency that alone can guarantee the continued openness of the political” (1996: 13).

Those with abiding democratic impulses were left with nowhere to turn but to their private selves, which often elicited a tendency toward a destructive solipsism. Critic and novelist Sakaguchi Ango presaged this movement with his 1942 essay, “Nihon Bunka Shikan” (“A Personal View of Japanese Culture”), in which he established a space of collective re-inscription, where devotion to “tradition” mattered less than a self and nation based on imagination responding to contemporary concerns: “Even though the ancient culture may be destroyed, our day-to-day lives would not come to an end, and as long as these are intact, our uniqueness is assured. It is safeguarded by the fact that we would have lost neither the needs that belong to us alone nor the desires that spring from those needs” (2011: 436). Or as James Dorsey comments on Sakaguchi’s text:

The self-realized individual is one who burrows beneath the misleading “static” of abstract thought by acting on impulse and, similarly, the “true” Japan is one unconcerned with locating or preserving its indigenous heritage as it faces the immediate challenges presented to its survival and well-being. In other words, although “emptied,” the categories of the individual and the nation remain, serving as receptacles for the incessant recreation of content. (2001: 350)

From this idea, a latent cultural narcissism germinated among the denizens of Tokyo’s literary subculture, leading years later to increasingly self-absorbed expression and behavior. Miryam

Sas cites Sakaguchi's seminal 1946 essay, "Darakuron" ("On Decadence"), as "a key site for exploring the frameworks that guided understandings of ideology and subjectivity" in the postwar era, especially in its wielding of the term *daraku* (*decadence*):

Degradation, delinquency, even apostasy—a place reached through the destruction of war—*daraku* marks an unmooring from religious, political, or social systematicity and structure. *Daraku*, related to the Buddhist term for falling away, has often been translated as decadence, depravity, or degeneration. Rotting or dissipation under the guise of an amoral, banal chaos, *daraku* is the anti-hierarchical, the "topsy-turvy." Ango sees *daraku* as the chaotic state that is also in fact the "real nature" of human beings, their "human essence." (2011: 5)

Sas notes Sakaguchi's *daraku* as "the place of a terrifying free-fall, a place related to animalistic desires for food and sex, a place of the body and of the black market," something that "may be banal, but it is precisely banality itself—heroes now reduced to black marketeers—that opens an alternative possibility: to seek one's own truly authentic way to fall" (2011: 6). Sakaguchi and numerous other avant-garde artists depicted postwar Japan's physical, social, and mental landscape as devoid of inspiration for interpersonal relations and behavior beyond one's own body and abject conditions of daily existence in a devastated environment. Thus was cultivated a heightened consciousness of the self through the individual body, which artists glorified in terms of *nikutai* ("flesh"). In Tamura's case, for instance, "all that was indisputably real, honest, fundamental—was the solitary physical individual," within which "the 'gate of flesh' was the 'gate to modernity'" (Dower 1999: 157). Or as Sakaguchi asserts in his 1946 essay, "Nikutai jitai ga shiko suru" ("Flesh Itself Thinks"), the body is left to its own devices in the absence of a comforting and reassuring *furusato* (nostalgically imagined hometown), and approaches "a cliff

that we come to in life that is without morals (or amoral), or in other words, without any possibility of any coherent belief or value system; but taking that moment itself seriously represents a kind of *moraru* (moral)” (Sas 2011: 9).

### **Stasis as Stability: The Personal Is (Not) the Political**

Proceeding into the 1950s and early 1960s, ambivalence among Japanese progressives increased, largely due to the failed ideals of left-wing activist and student movements. In the early postwar years, there were numerous and disparate mass protests against the soft-gloved authoritarianism of the Occupation authorities and the vice-grip of the right-wing politicians and business interests taking over the country’s resources and infrastructures. The establishment in 1951 of the Japan-US Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security and its renewal in 1960 were watershed events that led to an increased cynicism among opposition groups. Repeatedly, progressives failed to establish an effective foothold in either the Diet, the elected core of Japan’s parliamentary government, or in the ongoing popular imagination (Dower 1999, Viala and Masson-Sekine 1988). William Marotti summarizes the relationship between the Occupation and domestic reform efforts thusly:

The intertwined strategic objectives of containment, fortifying American interests in Asia, and showcasing American-led modernization globally led to choices that increasingly compromised stated progressive political and economic goals. These measures included the rehabilitation of rightists who had been initially purged, maintaining or restoring political advantages for elites, and destruction of the newly created activist labor unions. These all followed from the earliest, central compromise of democratic objectives: the retention of the emperor and the return of forms of imperial state authority within single

party rule, and the promotion of historical narratives obscuring issues of war responsibility—especially imperial responsibility. (2006: 607)

Intelligentsia, cultural figures, and students were not immune to feelings of powerlessness and marginalization, and though they continued to reject Westernization, and especially Americanization, many turned inward for a kind of saving grace. As Japan's political, economic, and cultural capital, Tokyo served as the nexus and flashpoint for new modes of resistance that grew out of this situation. When avant-garde artists began to take up the mantle of critique, it was within a milieu of young creators highly aware of the defeats of the immediate past as well as possibilities for the near future, at least within the context of their own lives. In speaking of the conditions that allowed for the inspiration and development of rebellious artistic movements in the 1960s, Jacob Raz writes:

Many Japanese felt inferior when confronted with American culture, which gave rise to a fervent desire to attain equal standing with America in both economic and cultural affairs. But modernization meant Americanization, and this created conflicting feelings.... Modernization could not be accepted, but neither could it be fought. It could only be laughed at, escaped from via nostalgia and "tradition," or dug into and reconstructed, as a nightmare image on stage. (Viala and Masson-Sekine 1988: 10-11)

Out of such confusion grew a cultural movement that eventually changed literary, visual, and performing arts, and, in some ways, political history, both in Japan and abroad. By the early 1960s, *subjectivity* was becoming the active keyword amongst the avant-garde as an all-encompassing paradigm of recursive being. Reference to not only one's idiosyncratic viewpoint and opinions but also personal experiences became common, resulting in highly autobiographical approaches. Writers such as Oe Kenzaburo and Abe Kobo were exploring the problematics of

modern self-identification in alternately surreal and absurd novels and plays (Oe 1969; Abe 1962 & 1964). Theater artists such as Terayama Shuji and Kara Juro established the *angura* (“underground”) movement of small ensembles performing highly personal and abstract narratives in marginal sites (Boyd 2006; Sorgenfrei 2005). Photographers such as Tomatsu Shomei, Hosoe Eikoh, Narahara Ikko, Moriyama Daido, and Fukase Masahisa established the *subjective documentary* and *are-bure-bokeh* (rough, blurry, out of focus) movements of photographic visualization of interior experience (Hosoe 1961, 1963 and 1970; Moriyama 2009 and 1972; Tomatsu 2004; Vartanian, et al. 2006).

Perhaps because of cinema’s inherent ability to reach the masses, Japanese New Wave filmmakers were especially effective at expressing an ambiguous internal dialogue around identity. Directors such as Imamura Shohei, Teshigahara Hiroshi, Hani Susumu, and, most notably, Oshima Nagisa, were, like their counterparts in France, Brazil, West Africa, and other regions, pushing cinema’s boundaries in order to express not simply rootlessness but the simultaneous politicization and solipsism of the country’s youth (Imamura 1961, 1963, and 1966; Teshigahara 1962, 1964, and 1966; Susumu 1963 and 1968; Oshima 1960, 1966, 1967, and 1969). Hani’s work from the start in the 1950s combined documentary techniques (e.g. non-professional actors, cinema verité visual style, and improvisation) with feature film narrative structures. He made numerous socially conscious films while remaining increasingly pessimistic about Japanese society’s compromises, eventually becoming a nature documentarian.<sup>8</sup>

Likewise, Oshima, Japan’s most famous and respected filmmaker internationally since Kurosawa Akira, created a dozen features between 1959 and 1970 mercilessly depicting a

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<sup>8</sup> Speaking to Donald Richie, Hani stated: “I do not admire people, though I admire many persons. But I don’t like what society does to persons. It perverts them. Yet, I don’t want to attack society.... What I would like to do is ignore it” (Richie 2004: 412-413).

morally enervated, corrupt, and nihilistic Japan. He ended this prolific stage of his career, however, with a muted, inward-looking optimism in a movie about a young political artist who films his will and commits suicide with the camera running:

The illusion I experienced, which is expressed in the title, *The War of Tokyo: Postwar Confidential* (1970), is related to the deep interest I took in the life and death struggle launched by the various sects of the student movement to prevent Prime Minister Sato from visiting the United States in 1969, a struggle which...seeing not a single death, ended the student struggles of the 1960s in a mood of defeat. I, too, wandered through the demonstrations at Haneda Airport, carrying a camera and filming what I could, but, of course, I did not die either. For me, the question of how to die in the 1970s is an answer to the question of how to live. (1970)

Within the same era were other sites of national growing pains and international upheaval: the two Vietnam Wars, the Hungarian Uprising, Prague Spring, Chinese Cultural Revolution, and 1968 in Paris, Mexico City, and Chicago. Ironically, America may have been the most similar to Japan in such cultural dynamics. While in Japan the efforts of the progressive left were shadowed by the subjectivity movement, in the United States the Civil Rights struggle was paralleled and in some ways imitated by the folk music revival. As Greil Marcus describes:

More than its own art movement, its own social movement, or its own fact, the folk revival was part of something much bigger, more dangerous, and more important: the civil rights movement. That is where its moral energy came from—its sense of a world to rediscover, to bring back to life, and to win. The two movements were fraternal twins, for the civil rights movement was also a rediscovery, a revival: of the Constitution. (1998: 22)

Through a similar frame, we may view Japanese postwar subjectivity as the wider movement that underlay butoh's genesis, providing the conditions that gave butoh space to blossom. Not only did subjectivity provide a socio-political context within which to thrive, but it also imbued butoh with an aesthetic permissiveness towards mythology and imaginaries. So many of the seminal Japanese postwar cultural figures engendered their practices through a skewed image of "traditional" culture, each person's own idiosyncratic "lost Japan," situated in tension with their contemporary social schizophrenia. Much like the chimerical figure of the young Bob Dylan leaving the far north backwaters of Minnesota, landing penniless in New York, arising mysteriously out of the folk revival, and donning an electrified, pop persona, so did another young, trickster-like figure escape from the far north no-man's-land of Tohoku, arrive destitute in Tokyo, emerge from the avant-garde, and refashion himself into a neo-primitivist cultural force.

### **The Body in Crisis**

Within this milieu that questioned dehumanizing aspects of new economic and cultural production models, a young dancer, Hijikata Tatsumi, worked in loose partnership with an older counterpart, Ohno Kazuo, to fashion an alternative dance form that Hijikata eventually labeled *ankoku butoh* (most often translated as "dance of darkness") and later shortened in familiar usage to *butoh*. By many accounts, Hijikata aimed to portray the tragedy and horror that he viewed as buried within the psyche of postwar Japanese society via deconstruction, absurdity, and darkness, reconstructing the nightmare of a foreign and inhumane modernism overpowering a previously dominant native culture as a "body in crisis," at war against its own nature and intuition.

While the reality was much more subtle—Japanese Modernists had forged their own domestic style by the 1930s, just as others had worldwide (Abi-Samara 2008; Clark & Tipton 2000; Silverberg 2009)—Hijikata’s narrative was a convenient semi-fantasy around which to craft his practice. He initially looked to the past, performing a consciously primitivist and sexually deviant dance as a return to an essentialized Japanese mind, body, and spirit and as a direct challenge to the mainstream, “historically progressive” social order represented by the Japanese dance world’s appropriation of Western classical and modern dance. Butoh artist Tamano Hiroko, who studied and performed for Hijikata in the 1970s, believes Hijikata’s personal challenges as a young, aspiring dancer served as inspiration for butoh’s fundamental concepts:

Hijikata-Sensei’s life story. The naivete, I think, coming from Tohoku. A kind of European atmosphere when he came out to Tokyo, and he learned classic ballet and flamenco and western dance. It’s so exotic.... Doing ballet, jumping and flying like a bird. Then one day he saw his own figure in the mirror. And he said, “Uh, oh, it’s not right. I’m not fitting in this beautiful classic ballet form. My body’s different. Short legs. Chest is skinny.”.... As much as he tried to get skilled, the body is not fitting there. Which means, “Where am I? Who am I? Where do I come from? Why is my body like this?” (2010)

Hijikata’s dance appeared to be the opposite of ballet’s upward, gravity-defying mobility and superlative aesthetics as well as modern dance’s clean lines, symmetry, and heroic uplift (Kurihara 1996, Baird 2005, Novack 1989). As photographer and frequent Hijikata collaborator, Hosoe Eikoh, remarked about Hijikata’s legacy:

While Western dancers or dances want to express their energies or powers toward the sky, butoh dancers look for the energies down toward the earth, as if you have the gods in heaven and also the gods in the earth. Because their energies go downward, it means they're looking for their identity in their own inner world. (1991)<sup>9</sup>

Canadian contemporary dance artist and butoh practitioner Denise Fujiwara, who worked for many years in Western modern and postmodern dance and still choreographs primarily for similarly-trained dancers, views butoh's relationship with Western dance as fundamentally tenuous: "The Western forms of dance that I studied, and also gymnastics, value technique, athleticism, form, dynamics, filling space, action, virtuosity, sending energy out to the audience, and charisma. Butoh may at times possess some of those qualities but values none of them" (2012).

While Hijikata is not known to have explicitly reacted or responded to Western postmodern dance forms that also rejected this value structure through use of lateral space, quotidian movement, minimal costuming, or abstract themes (Novack 1989), his works did address psycho-physiological, energetic, and, especially, social qualities of the dancing mind-body entity. This is not surprising given that most Japanese modern dancers in the 1950s had received training in the lineages of Ishii Baku or Eguchi Takaya, who was a student of German Expressionist dance pioneer, Mary Wigman. As Carol Brown explains about German Expressionist dance, which, on the one hand, framed the body within a mechanistic paradigm, also provided a conceptual path towards embracing stark emotional contrasts, and perhaps even a sense of contradiction, in the performing body:

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<sup>9</sup> While much Western postmodern dance since the early 1960s has also challenged this upward and, especially, authoritarian aesthetic in Western classical dance, Hosoe is implicitly referring to mainstream dance styles in postwar Japan that adopted such forms, which constituted the primary aesthetic and value structure against which Hijikata was working.

Other Central European choreographers such as Mary Wigman and Gertrud Bodenweiser combined Laban's insights into the dynamic properties of space with an awareness of the unconscious drives of Freudian psychoanalysis to develop a genre of *ekstatic* dance. Dances which, in their content and form explored *being-outside-of-oneself* and which embodied states of rapture, delirium and intensity of projection, represented the unconscious depths of the dancing body and projected this depth into an outside where it transcended the space-time of the present. (2010: 60)

Most butoh performance appears slow and methodical, with a low center of gravity and given to grotesque imagery and transgressive content. Unlike many dance forms in which technique and content exist primarily as outward expression, Hijikata's dance rejected movement that smacked of superficial appearance without the sense of an underlying, subjective *being* present and struggling against a dominant culture and ideology. In an early essay, "To Prison" (1961), he railed against Western hegemony, advocated a dance of darkness inspired by criminality and death, and framed his art as an anti-capitalist credo:

All the power of civilized morality, hand in hand with the capitalist economic system and its political institutions, is utterly opposed to using the body simply for the purpose, means, or tool of pleasure. Still more, to a production-oriented society, the aimless use of the body, which I call dance, is a deadly enemy, which must be taboo.... In this sense my dance, based on human self-activation, including male homosexuality, crime, and a naive battle with nature, can naturally be a protest against the "alienation of labor" in capitalist society. (2000: 44-45)

Actor and director Antonin Artaud, one of Hijikata's idols, made a similar clarion call in his 1932 treatise, *Le Theatre et Son Double (The Theatre and Its Double)*, wherein he states, "And

the question we must now ask is whether, in this slippery world which is committing suicide without noticing it, there can be found a nucleus of men capable of imposing this superior notion of the theater, men who will restore to all of us the natural and magic equivalent of the dogmas in which we no longer believe” (1958: 32).

Both Artaud and Hijikata were reacting to the imagined opposite end of an East-West cultural binary—the European Artaud to Bali, the Asian Hijikata to America—that neither man had directly experienced. Whatever the reality of inspiration or imitation, suffice to say that Hijikata seems to have viewed himself squarely within Artaud’s lineage of transnational cultural engagement. We might view the bluntly transgressive nature of this engagement as what Derrida called a necessary “general strategy of deconstruction,” which avoids “simply neutralizing” or “simply residing within the closed field” of oppositions: “To do justice to this necessity is to recognize that in a classical philosophical opposition we are not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of a vis-a-vis, but rather with a violent hierarchy.... To deconstruct the opposition, first of all, is to overturn the hierarchy at a given moment” (2004: 38-39).

Hijikata’s self-marginalization in relation to a commodity-centric paradigm marked *butoh* as a practice concerned with the fraught relationships among body, identity, and commerce. For example, dancer Tanaka Min, who has developed his own form of structured improvisational dance from the 1970s to the present, also felt drawn to work with Hijikata for years and finally did so with their collaboration, “Foundation of Love *Butoh*” (1984). Tanaka has always resisted creating work that is readily commoditized:

Dance is collected to the theater for showing to intellectual people or dance audiences.

It’s a dance society. I’m really bored with this. I think dance as a fashion is finished.

From this century, we really have to make it much more pure, and think more about

where we came from. Where dance came from, and for what dance has to exist. That's why I'm really studying ancient things, rituals, and imaginations of ancient peoples. And most of the performers of Japan, originally they are the people not included in society. Most physical expressions are started from them. We are the children of those who were thrown out of society. (2009)

Though butoh originated in Japan over a half century ago, it has remained there an "alternative" form just outside the mainstream performing arts world. This is despite the fact that, according to historian Thomas R.H. Havens, in 1980, just before the height of Japan's postwar rise to become a cultural and economic powerhouse, Japan was second only to the United States in its number of professional dancers and dance teachers (1982: 13). Havens also asserts that by the 1980s there were still three large "enigmas" facing Japanese artists looking to push aesthetic boundaries: Japanese audiences' fascination with foreign spectacle events and "blockbuster" art; the emphasis on social conformity in Japanese society, which tends to marginalize the arts as unserious and existing solely for entertainment purposes; and Japanese cultural emphasis on artistic technique over expressive quality and content (1982: 19-20). Add to these challenges Havens's observation that Hijikata opposed what he saw as a "barren and meaningless" contemporary society and maintained an ambivalence "very well tuned to the nonabsolute, concrete quality of most Japanese social thinking after the war" (1982: 225), and it becomes clear why butoh continues to be marginalized.

Butoh also remains, however, an object of fascination in Japan. Numerous books on butoh have been published and are readily available throughout the country. In trips to Japan over the last 14 years, I have always been struck by the fact that most people that I meet are quite surprised that I am a butoh artist and wonder aloud why I would choose a mode of expression

that so many find unfathomable. I get the distinct feeling that they assume my becoming a butoh artist was a weighty decision in which I expressly declared my non-conformity, as opposed to simply acting according to my artistic nature or reflecting on my self-awareness as a human being.<sup>10</sup>

Dance critic Goda Nario describes the connection between what might be called butoh's "natural outsider" stance, in which one's instinctual and socialized behaviors may paradoxically conflict, and such a position's effect of producing a "disabled" bodily image: "Within your body consciousness, sometimes there is a subconscious rebellion you cannot explain. If you pursue these strange things, you show your confused self, and you feel the shock of your body" (Horton Fraleigh 1999: 175).

This sense of shock and its resulting crisis state was crucial to butoh's formation. In 1960, Hijikata presented an evening of new work contextualized by an essay, "Inner Material/Material," wherein he laid out the increasingly darker aspects of his work:

Audiences pay money to enjoy evil. We must make compensation for that. Both the "rose-colored dance" and the "dance of darkness" must spout blood in the name of the experience of evil. A body that has kept the tradition of mysterious crisis is prepared for that. Sacrifice is the source of all work and every dancer is an illegitimate child set free to experience that very quality. (2000: 39)

Hijikata goes on to articulate a rationale for the necessity of crisis in his dance:

In this separation between this material and myself, bodies that have maintained the crisis of the primal experience celebrate their mutually dizzying encounter. It is most surely

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<sup>10</sup> Conversely, in the West, I am often faced with the inverse mindset, one impressed by a seemingly "exotic" and "mystical" practice. Many Western viewers even assume that butoh is a "traditional" Japanese art form, possibly centuries old.

that which lies behind the symbolic quality of all bodies. Under a vivid sign the material and I take our first step to the treatment site for movement while anticipating various things in giving up our lives to a sweaty “engagement.” This battle is the matrix of my art. (2000: 41)

In “To Prison,” Hijikata describes his stance even more viscerally: “I would like to be sitting, without even a passport, smack in the middle of a mistake” (2000: 45). In a 1977 interview, he states, “I am not being visited by a sense of crisis, rather I am demanding it” (Hijikata, Senda, and Suzuki 2000: 62-63). In short, *crisis*, along with the existential struggles that come with it, became the very essence of butoh from its inception.

Early butoh artists went to extreme lengths to create alternative mind-body practices in an attempt to erase or severely disable their psycho-physiological vulnerability to the hegemonic order. They forged a practice that became, not so much a choreographic form, but a method for fostering a virtual assisted suicide of the socialized body, a dialectic mode of simultaneously inviting and resisting commodification. Engaging both desire and repulsion, butoh became a subcultural stance akin to social “noise,” described by Dick Hebdige as an “interference in the orderly sequence which leads from real events and phenomena to their representation in the media” and “an actual mechanism of semantic disorder” (2006: 153). Early butoh artists consciously adopted a style that made them as unmarketable as possible while also keeping themselves on the market, simultaneously refusing legitimacy yet demanding to be heard, and doing so in a way that challenged viewers’ expectations for completeness. As Goda describes: “In Hijikata’s Butoh, half of the self is not conceived, so it is very dynamic. It is theatrical because it is alive and unfinished.... Total art is totalizing (totalitarian). We can learn to be

happy with what is finished and imperfect.... If you perform what you experience, if you show your confused self, it is total” (Horton Fraleigh 1999: 176).

As Richard Schechner observes in citing the relationship between supposedly “unliterate” cave paintings and modern drama, “Historically speaking, in the West, drama detached itself from doing; communication replaced manifestation” (1985: 22). In relation to such systems, developed over centuries for inscribing texts of dominant, “literate” cultures on their respective societies, *drama as manifestation* then becomes an implicitly political act. Thus, the surreal and illogical meaning-making process developed during butoh’s early years was meant to push back against hegemonic inscription: embodiment reclaiming drama: *manifestation replacing communication*.

Manifesting this approach, however, necessitates some form of socializing structure since language has been incorporated into conceptualization, training, and realization of countless art forms and life practices. An example of this may include the sought-after *kensho* experience in Zen Buddhism, where a student may suddenly, after much textual study and countless discussions with a teacher, realize, *nonverbally*, the essential meaning of *mu* (“no,” “non-,” “nothing,” or “emptiness”). As *kensho* occurs after long, rigorous study, mostly dialectic, until the student only comprehends without direct semantic reference, this condition might be understood as not so much non-literate or unliterate as *post-literate*. Getting most people to transcend language requires getting them not around words but through them. This is the rationale for koans, most of which cannot be fundamentally engaged in a logical or verbal manner. Koans decontextualize language by subverting its normative contexts.

Similarly, Hijikata’s training form employs imagery through text, what he called *butoh-fu* (butoh words), to stimulate and inspire surreal movement and body imagery as well as the

embodiment of seeming contradiction. Further, through gradual deconstruction of their domesticated bodies via subversion, destruction, and transformation of conventional behavior, butoh artists may be considered *post-socialized*. Through accessing psycho-physiological states rooted in their sensual-perceptual faculties, they act as energetic focal points, or “windows,” through which an audience may view and experience a ritual state that is focused not so much on being “expressive” as on being “present,” i.e. being “being” itself.

As their purposes serve to reify an individual’s body and desires apart from a hegemonically imposed environment or delusion, butoh performers exist in opposition to the power-centric, capitalist goals intrinsic to Guy Debord’s *spectacle*:

The first phase of the domination of the economy over social life brought into the definition of all human realization the obvious degradation of *being* into *having*. The present phase of total occupation of social life by the accumulated results of the economy leads to a general sliding of *having* into *appearing*, from which all actual “having” must draw its immediate prestige and ultimate function. (2006: 120)

Conversely, the degradation over time from existential permanence and stasis to impermanence and fluidity that may be experienced in butoh is in direct opposition to what Debord cites as the degradation from being to appearing, and is, therefore, anti-authoritarian at root. There are exceptions, but generally butoh practitioners resist *spectacle*-like, ideological dominance by passing through phases of seemingly unharmonious means and situating themselves within environments that call for mind-body-spirit unity. Hijikata delved into a chaotic dark side, specifically avoiding any notion of perfection, seeking instead irresolution, asymmetry, and compromise: the beauty within the transient decay of life: the completeness of incompleteness. Over the years, images of disability and the grotesque became butoh artists’ stock-in-trade. As

Petra Kuppers states, “the power of the grotesque can be greater than just binary ‘otherness’ . This power becomes dangerous, contagious, when it is not ‘bracketed’, that is, set in clear opposition” (2003: 46). By portraying the potential for disability in every person, such notions may come to represent ephemerality and the dread of weakness, disintegration, and death. As butoh dancer Katsura Kan details:

The body and face were very conservative when butoh artists began, but they committed many taboos onstage, and they were shocking for many people. And then many people gradually accepted and appreciated it, because we evoke from the viewers’ own dark side, which they are used to hiding. If we show our dark side, we become total existence, and then become healthy. So we are aiming to make the world healthy. And so we are still seeking. I’m standing between dark side and bright side. More in between, trying to go back and forth, back and forth, show how much we have a dark side. Many people believe we are looking for beauty, but butoh is looking for before beauty. (2009)

Having experienced first-hand Hijikata’s initial, purposefully shocking performances during the volatile 1960s as one of his first students, butoh artist Nakajima Natsu also believes in butoh’s potential for creating a rebellious impulse:

Good art will evoke the feeling of experience for audiences. Even one glance, it’s something. In the mind of audiences, revolution can start. So whether the performer will experience something or whether audiences will experience something, I think that’s the point. Or in a general way, the performers can touch themselves, then the audience can touch themselves. (2011)

The philosophical framework and image-oriented techniques through which butoh practice navigates such dualities—interior/exterior, light/dark, beauty/ugliness, passivity/revolution—and

the way they may overlap, conjoin, and interact makes *liminality* central to butoh. For example, butoh co-founder Ohno Kazuo taught a liminal, *dead body*, container technique. As Jean Viala describes:

The dancer must separate himself from his physical and social identity. Ono says that Butoh revolves around the idea of the “dead body,” into which the dancer places an emotion, which can then freely express itself. Without this technique, the “living body” would divert the emotion, drawing us into its own logic. (Viala and Masson-Sekine 1988: 22)

This technique is akin to Zen practice as explained by Yuasa Yasuo. Zen fosters a liminal state, aiming to release the mind/body from a purely logical structure: “Indeed, the passions and impulses sometimes rebel against rational consciousness. The body qua pathos is heavy and vehement, resisting the consciousness qua *logos*” (Yuasa 1987: 121).

Due to butoh’s etymology as well as its formation by trained dancers framing their activities as “dance,” the practice is also paradoxically a standard cultural form maintained by appropriating normative signs and modalities. Though practitioners are often loath to define their art, they usually refer to themselves as “dancers” and employ costume, lighting, rehearsals, hierarchical relationships (director-choreographers directing dancer-performers), and so forth. Yet the all-encompassing labels of “dancer,” “choreographer,” or even “performer” are also employed as an oppositional catalyst, a virus infecting the dominant order, from which practitioners attempt to hold themselves apart by dissociating from standardized “texts” of socialization.

Ask the same butoh artist five times, “Are you a butoh dancer?” and you may receive five answers, just as each artist will give a different definition of butoh. For Kan, his identity as a

butoh dancer is bound up with the effect of his work on audiences: “I think it’s better to say I’m a butoh dancer, because if I say butoh dancer, people ask me what does that mean, “butoh”? If I call myself something more abstract, people don’t have so strong a question about me” (2009). For Nakajima, who has practiced for almost 50 years but trained for only four years with Hijikata before becoming independent, butoh has been a matter of finding one’s subjective relationship to the practice and moving on from there: “Artists should make their own style. So in some ways I created my own style. I don’t know if this is butoh or not, but it’s my style. So what I’m dancing now is kind of a definition of my butoh” (2011).

By rejecting recognizable textual status—becoming, as it were, “unscriptable”—butoh artists wish to exist in the profane realm outside of the “sacred frontier” of “legitimate culture,” unrelated to “taste, the uncreated source of all ‘creation’” and useless to the hegemonic order’s “aristocracy of culture” (Bourdieu 2006: 324-325). They transform this profane embodiment into a dialectically-mediated expression and encode signs from objectified, archetypal categories (e.g. salaryman, ghostly female, village idiot) through the simultaneously signified and embodied filter of a primitivized, “premodern” (or pre-Western) body in crisis (Klein 1987; Viala and Masson-Sekine 1988). Audiences decoding such performances are faced with reading seeming contradictions on numerous levels, such as sexual desire/repression; coordination/disability in socialized gestures; abstract/concrete embodiment; or physical and psychic conflict/resolution. Hijikata and his progeny sought status as trickster-like, liminal, and subversive entities secretly self-employed in the assembly line of hegemonic cultural production, constructing themselves as partially-readable signs assembled from damaged codes and presented as unsettling, semi-unconsumable commodities.

Considering the historical context of the late capitalist and neo-colonial setting in which these developments took place in a postwar Japan as culturally inscribed by American politics, we might view such a method as an early form of decolonizing Japanese performance art. In a way, Hijikata defined and self-inscribed his dance and way of life within a realm of *terra nullius*, or “empty land,” within delegitimized social milieux, outside dominant and authoritarian strictures, identifying, for example, with street hustlers: “My friendship with the male prostitutes at Ueno Kurumazaka is what strongly inclined me toward the art of imitation. A ragged head of hair, size 11 feet, rouge, death from cold in a public lavatory—with these tools at hand any choreographer, no matter how lazy, should be able to create a dance” (2000: 41), or with imprisoned criminals: “I see my own dance in a state of joyful group bathing in prison, and I see inmates on death row in the fall of modern civilization and in the family crest of its good sense. I see the original form of my dance in their walk” (2000: 46).

By rooting his performance personae in de-valued territories, by searching for “home” in places of capture and loss, Hijikata marked his butoh as a pursuit of *abjection*, through which, as Julia Kristeva states, desire is unending and played out in a dialectic of sublimation and perversion: “The border between abjection and the sacred, between desire and knowledge, between death and society, can be faced squarely, uttered without sham innocence or modest self-effacement, provided one sees in it an incidence of man's particularity as *mortal and speaking*. ‘There is an abject’ is henceforth stated as, ‘I am abject, that is, mortal and speaking’” (1982: 88). Or as Hijikata describes the existential nature of a prisoner on death row: “A person not walking but made to walk; a person not living but made to live; a person not dead but made to be dead must, in spite of such total passivity, paradoxically expose the radical vitality of human nature” (2000: 46).

In this sense, butoh begs the question of what parts of our identities are considered “empty,” unmarketable, or of no value. In a way, butoh training may be seen as the decommodification of the expressive self. Its focus on indeterminacy and states of psychophysiological crisis is an attempt to remove the self from normative modalities of exchange between self and other and, by extension, between performer and audience. However, restructuring—“choreographing”—this self as performance re-places it within a conventional system of exchange. Placing a decommodified self onstage is fundamentally an act of *re*-commodification and points to butoh’s fundamentally paradoxical nature. As Maro Akaji, founder-director of Dairakudakan, the oldest and one of the most successful butoh companies, states, “Butoh is timeless. It is always about to be born. If it actually came into being, it would cease to exist. Butoh is eternally unborn” (Blackwood 1990).

### **Embodying Duality**

Within butoh’s mode of corporeal and social engagement, we can see the previously-mentioned binaries at work. The imagined tension between a domesticated exterior and “primitive” interior reflects an *omote/ura* duality operating within and focused on the material flesh, or “body” (*nikutai*). Performers allow themselves to be driven, choreographically or spontaneously, by hegemonic structures underlying everyday behavior. Hijikata largely identified this exterior persona with Western culture, framing Japan’s modernization as a foreign invasion and idealizing many older Japanese whom he saw as maintaining a culturalist essence, a premodern corporeality that Hijikata fetishized: “I eventually arrive at my material by carefully walking around Tokyo where the generation whose hands made eyes has not altogether died out” (2000: 40).

Throughout the 1960s, as he sought to reignite this imagined body, Hijikata collaborated with artists of like mind and gradually gathered around him a group of performance acolytes, many living communally at his studio. Their relatively undeveloped performance skills made them prime raw material to be molded by visceral and transgressive means. In “To Prison,” Hijikata foreshadowed the foundation of this method: “It’s good to be able to pick up material from among the boys wiping up at metal-plating workshops or squatting in garages. I look at their hands. A movement of coarse particles spills over. Their backbones incline slightly forward. There is a dance that slides down that slope. Gelatin can be changed by an unfortunate glance” (2000: 40).

By methodically heightening the tension between such inner/outer and insider/outsider dualities, Hijikata promoted a crisis state that forces the practitioner (and, by extension, those witnessing) to resolve such oppositions. This is implicitly a rejection of the prevalence in Japanese culture of maintaining public and private face, *omote-ura*, which, according to Doi Takeo, in the performance of everyday life, is bound up with the parallel dyad of *tatemaie* and *honne*: “While *tatemaie* appears in *omote*, *honne* is concealed in *ura*” (2001: 37). *Tatemaie* refers to “principles or rules that have been established as natural or proper” and that always imply “the existence of a group of people in its background who assent to it,” while *honne* refers to one’s true inner feelings, which may or may not be expressed, and “in fact...individual, personal ways of viewing the *tatemaie* can themselves be said to be *honne*” (2001: 36-37). Sorgenfrei notes how these pairs are intertwined in normative Japanese behavior: “In public, people mask their feelings by displaying *omote* and behave according to onstage *tatemaie*. In contrast, they hide their deepest *ura* and generally exhibit private, backstage *honne* behavior only to close family or intimate relations” (2005: 54).

Conversely, Hijikata expressly posits a direct engagement with *tatema*e and *honne*, with what is visible and invisible, accepted and rejected, centered and marginalized. Doi asserts that *omote/tatema*e and *ura/honne* are always already intertwined and inseparable, which causes an unacknowledged psychological crisis, a “subtly shifting ‘twofold consciousness’—a balance that can alternate even within a single spoken sentence—that non-Japanese often find so confusing, contradictory, or even ‘hypocritical’” (Sorgenfrei 2005: 54). This contradiction, however, is the exact crisis that Hijikata spoke of exposing as a false safety net:

This cast-off skin is our land and home...totally different from that other skin that our body has lost.... One skin is that of the body approved by society. The other skin is that which has lost its identity. So, they need to be sewn together, but this sewing together only forms a shadow. I admire our ancestors who took good care of the feeling in the soles of their feet. (Hoffman and Holborn 1987: 121).

Looking back to Doi’s concept of the paradoxical inseparability within the self of *omote* and *ura* (outer mask and inner essence), Hijikata’s apparent solution for resolving this duality was to embrace its contradictions in order to transcend the paradox. Combining this self-integration with abject personae to structure his choreography, Hijikata posited a performative method for mentally staring into the mirror without reason, pretension, or judgment: “If we, humans, learn to see things from the perspective of an animal, an insect, or even inanimate objects...the road trodden everyday is alive” (Viala and Masson-Sekine 1988: 65).

Sakabe’s theoretical connection between the inner-outer self of *omote-ura* and the mirror of *kage* then becomes an experience of surface and reflection seen from within and without the same dual entity of self. While in some cultures a person’s “mask” presented to others is considered separate from one’s underlying identity, Japanese society tends to frame one’s self-

defined identity by one's collectively perceived identity, where outer mask and inner self are considered one and the same. As Sakabe asserts about Japanese culture, "there is neither the category of Cartesian substance for any kind of rigid or fixed dualism between soul and body, exterior and interior, seen and unseen" and "there is nothing but grids of surfaces that are, at least in principle, strictly reversible, the one into the other" (2002: 247). Reality for Sakabe is a hall of mirrors, which "are reality, and reality is constantly in flux. The shadow and the reflection are not delusions, nor do they lead one astray; rather, they are intertwined, interconnected components of being, which is itself a process of continual transformation" (Sorgenfrei 2005: 57).

Marra interprets Sakabe's noting of Noh master Zeami's famous concept of an actor's *hana* ("flower") as the source of poetic truth that is more significant than one's mimetic skill: "Without losing his meaning as a subject, the persona retains it as a form upon which truth is predicated. Truth is production of meaning that cannot be meant. Rather than in a sign, truth can be recovered in the anxiety caused by the demise of meaning" (Marra 2002: 234).

In this sense, Zeami's flower is akin to Hijikata's body in crisis. Both embody Sakabe's unified dualism of mask and face and give primacy to a subjectively experienced, meaning-making process enacted by the performer in a critical state of self-unknowing. Thus, I interpret Hijikata's statements generally to mean that if practitioners can see and accept their identities as perennially in flux, they can become intimately familiar with their transformative potential, thereby freeing themselves through awareness of hegemony's attempts to determine their every move. Thus, from that point onward, every movement motivated by or constructed from consciousness of one's existential mutability becomes a recursive act of resistance.

## Life in the Looking-Glass

For many postwar Japanese artists, looking into the mirror in this way was not just a political act but a way of life, with autobiography their expressive mode. Terayama, for example, spoke of breaking down what he saw as arbitrary barriers between fact and fiction in one's life:

I want to question the validity of...distinctions (the false versus the real, imaginary experience versus real-life experience). I want to ask what these distinctions imply, and I want to restore people's identification with the coexistence of opposites (making them one and the same). (Sorgenfrei 2005: 57)

Terayama advocated against any one element of life superseding any other, and for all extremes and seeming contradictions in the self and society to resolve into coexistence as a single unified entity. He repeatedly used his own life, especially his imagined childhood in Tohoku, as a data bank of images, emotions, and psychic states from which to draw. As Steven C. Ridgely observes about Terayama's series of multidisciplinary works, *Den'en ni shisu (Death in the Country)* (1964-1974):

He recycled his own material and repeatedly deployed a set of signifiers (clocks, axes, household shrines, red combs, and Mt. Fear) in a way that generated new, mythlike narrative streams. This set, on further analysis, appears to derive from childhood memories of his home province in northern Japan (Aomori) mixed with later news items and tourist campaigns that billed the area as prehistoric and mystical. (2011: xxv)

Sorgenfrei states that it "was Terayama's project to transform his home prefecture (and his own childhood) into something both alien and familiar to his urban audiences. Terayama's Aomori became the object of nostalgic desire, a mythic locale that epitomized the otherness within Japan" (2005: 117). Thus, by staging a reflection of his own real and imagined duality through a

world of subaltern characters and marginalized identities, Terayama was able to portray an intricate web of insider/outsider and *omote-ura* dualities that resonated with postwar Japanese audiences dealing with the same issues. *Home* for Terayama wasn't just a nightmare Aomori with which he was obsessed and to which he could never return; it was the very real terror of a compromised society within which his audiences were still trapped.

Onto this autobiographical complex, we may note that Japanese mothers are known and expected to offer overwhelmingly unconditional support and acceptance to their children throughout their lives, to the point of what many Westerners consider overindulgence. Ian Buruma points out that Japanese children's "emotional security tends to depend almost entirely on the physical presence of the mother" (1984: 20). Also citing Doi, Buruma explains the paradoxical process of children learning to garner affection via a show of passive dependence on their mothers, or *amaeru*, the verb form of *amae*'s mutual dependency that represents its assumption by both parties, and which later manifests in every basic social context: "It goes on in adult life too: juniors do it to seniors in companies, or any other group, women do it to men, men do it to their mothers, and sometimes wives, the Japanese government does it to stronger powers, such as the United States" (1984: 21).

Thus, Japanese social mores often drive families to engage in codependent relationships driven by *amae*'s mutual dependency based on unconditional love. In other words, the concept of the Japanese mother as a nurturing guardian also implies a continuously safe and stable *place* within which one may reside throughout life. It is a cultural stereotype but also a truism that Japanese parents and children often live together throughout their lives in mutual dependency. In this sense, as the domestic authority charged with maintaining a stable structure, mother *is* home, and home *is* mother, especially in the postwar period, when the concept of *ie*—similar to the

broad, collective belonging of “house” or “clan” in English—“gradually lost its validity after the war as the nuclear family became the dominant social unit” (Nakamaki 2003: 4-5). The danger, therefore, in a postwar society characterized by a loss of cultural identity, of how one defines one’s home, is that a codependent relationship may easily slide into becoming coterminous as well, leaving the “child” with nowhere to turn but inward. The search for identity through subjective means may then become less a willful act of defiance than a desperate search for mother/home fraught with self-indulgence, solipsism, or narcissism. This is *omote* without *ura*, *kage* without a subject: a reflection without a face.

That many artists in the 1960s might cross over this line was noted in both the praise and criticism leveled at them. One may interpret Terayama’s autobiographically-inspired stage and television plays, such as *The Hunchback of Aomori* (1967), *Inugami: The Dog-God* (1969), and *Death in the Country* (1974), as replete with images and moments of loss, hubris, and psychopathology, especially in regards to the artist’s relationship with his mother and how it was projected and imagined in his work (Ridgely 2011; Sorgenfrei 2005). Conversely, Abe Kobo’s existentialist novel, *Woman in the Dunes* (1962), leaves its readers staring at their own feet. It portrays a man trapped in a huge sand pit, struggling against the loss of any systematic knowledge of self, and finally acceding to the isolated comfort of a nameless woman, who will provide a *mother/home* for him for the rest of his life. Starting in the late 1960s, influenced by Terayama’s surreal frenzy and the solitary aesthetic of photographers like Tomatsu, Hosoe, and Narahara Ikko, photographer Moriyama Daido published or contributed photo essays to numerous books and magazines that posited not only the legitimacy or value of individual perspective, but took it to the point of identifying with only a single individual, i.e. himself: “Photographs I take while on a trip are the commemoration of the fact that *I existed* in that place

or that I happened to see something there—they are not the commemoration of my visit” (Vartanian, et al. 2006: 101).

The logical extension (and, some would argue, dead end) inherent in such a path is exemplified by photographer Araki Nobuyoshi, who, beginning in the mid-1960s, increasingly revealed his foibles, prejudices, amorality, and obsessions, as well as his deep and abiding love for the world, his work, and, especially, his wife, Yoko. He photographed and wrote about her, displaying her physically and emotionally naked body for all to see over the course of 20 years from the self-publication in 1971 of “Sentimental Journey,” a photo essay of their honeymoon, to her terminal illness and death in 1990, a period covered in his photo book, “Winter Journey.” Araki depicts a struggle against the absolute reality of a photo-subject that one cannot fundamentally alter, causing the photographer to see oneself more clearly, warts and all; the impossible subject as mirror. In an essay from 1976, he states:

In photographing a woman’s genitals laid bare, you must make the stripper and the audience know when the shutter is released. Likewise, the strobe flashes in time with the shutter’s sound. With that, the stripper’s embarrassment and one’s own embarrassment can be bared clearly, to the stripper and the audience alike, and the person who releases the shutter himself is likewise exposed. (2006: 151)

Ultimately, Araki represents photography as not only expression or self-declaration but *self-actualization* and *existence*: a visualized and imagined performance of self in the looking-glass of the camera lens. Peering back on Hijikata’s public performance of self in the same period as these other artists, we can see how his actions paralleled the autobiographical stagings of artists like Terayama. Even more, his exploits embodied self-actualization through the camera lens of

his close collaborator, photographer Hosoe Eikoh, and the consequences of this artistic relationship have fundamentally affected the practice of butoh to this day.

## CHAPTER 2

### IMAGINED INNOCENCE LOST

On numerous occasions between 1965 and 1968, two men made their way from Tokyo to the cold, windswept farm plains of the Tohoku region of northern Japan armed with 35mm cameras, black-and-white film, distant childhood memories, and an improvisational facility for invoking searing, subconscious imagery. One was Hijikata Tatsumi, who had resigned in protest from Japan's National Dance Association after the uproar surrounding *Kinjiki* and staked out a career independent of mainstream legitimacy. The other was Hosoe Eikoh, a young photographer freshly minted into the upper echelon of contemporary visual arts after creating *Barakei (Ordeal by Roses)* (1963), a photo book collaboration with writer Mishima Yukio, in which the latter was literally wrapped, laid, lifted, and enthralled within a gorgeous and deathly fantasy world sprung from Hosoe's mind and Mishima's soul.

The resulting photo essay came to be called *Kamaitachi (Sickle-Weasel)* (1969), an invisible beast from Tohoku folklore that hid in wind flurries and attacked passersby on lonely roads, cutting and quickly sealing them up before bleeding, so that the injury and pain lay underneath, mysteriously agitating and eating away from within. Since their first exhibition and publication in the late 1960s, the photos have become iconic in art history and served to further the artistry and careers of both collaborators.

But how is *Kamaitachi*, in the words of Hosoe and his postwar photography contemporaries, a "subjective documentary"? How was a sense of both men's childhoods in Tohoku mined and reconstructed in order to create a visual-performative expression of folk mythology that resulted in propagating a contemporary mythology around Hijikata himself?

What do the photos show us? Do they possess *immanence*—do they desire something in the viewer—or does such a quality reside exclusively in the eye of beholder?<sup>11</sup>

Looking at the images, we see over three dozen monochrome photos of Hijikata in various states of embodiment and action.<sup>12</sup> The first handful are in an urban setting, and then, except for a short foray into a photo studio, the images move to an unnamed rural landscape. In all the photos, Hijikata's character lies within the full continuum of the gaze. In interaction with villagers and city-dwellers, he is alternately depicted as watching, being watched, and in implicit observational competition—what I would call “*other-ing*”—with those around him. He is inspected, mocked, paid obeisance to, embraced, mourned. He threatens, lurks, ingratiates, seduces, molests, flees, attacks, and struggles. He flares devil horns in broad daylight. He hibernates like a hidden demon or incipient plague on a shelf in an old barn. He marries an adolescent farm girl and initiates her pubescent eroticism in a field of zinnias. He chases another bride, older, fat, toothless, and drunk, who matches his maddened state, step for disjunctive step. He repeatedly flies through the air, the panels of his kimono flaring in every direction, as if transformed into chaos itself. In one of the final images, he careens through a rice paddy with a screaming baby in one arm, the other outstretched, as if clawing the very air that constitutes *and* conceals his uncontrollable, unnamable nature.

Born in the north but growing up in Tokyo and only living in the countryside for one year as a 12 year-old evacuee during the Tokyo firebombings of 1944-1945, Hosoe recalled, “I liked

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<sup>11</sup> I refer to *immanence* as inherence, innateness, or a state of remaining or dwelling within. Other religious definitions notwithstanding, the term also connotes a secular mode of sacredness in imagery that circulates within any number of cultural contexts, including that of photos in the *butoh* community.

<sup>12</sup> In 2009, Aperture Foundation produced a new trade book edition with eight additional photos never before published (Hosoe 2009).

the landscapes and the environment of the country, but I hated the country itself.... Children playing around the corner would watch me with old, cold eyes.... Farmers' children were plump, but we from the city were thin from hunger. Their laughing expressions were awful. The dark, snowy country seemed to be full of ghosts" (Viala and Masson-Sekine 1988: 191-192). Hosoe's impetus for the project was quite personal: "I had the strange feeling...that I should not hate the land where my mother was born. If I hated it, I would hate my own mother. *Kamaitachi*, then, is a very personal record of my own memory from boyhood, with all the complex feelings of love and hate from those days in the countryside" (Viala and Masson-Sekine 1988: 192).

In the late 1950s, Hosoe and Hijikata had joined in the avant-garde zeitgeist of questioning Japan's new identity. Hijikata came to an upending ethos, framing as positive what is dark, grotesque, and rejected by a psychically compromised society. Jean Genet was one of his favorite writers: "Genet, rejected by society, affirms himself as he is, rejecting society in turn, and constructing his own paradoxical ethos. This paradoxical conversion became Hijikata's guiding aesthetic throughout his life: the ugly is the beautiful; death is life" (Kurihara 2000: 18).

Among a new breed of Japanese photographers dedicated to personalized images, Hosoe also found his aesthetic voice in stark contrasts of light and dark, especially after witnessing Hijikata's *Kinjiki* premiere, whereupon the two men became collaborators and lifelong friends. Both artists delved into the alienation of late capitalism, Hosoe by forging a visceral style of tenuous self-identity poised between tradition, modernity, and fetishization of the body, and Hijikata by reveling, vaccine-like, in its tragic schizophrenia as a form of ritualized affliction and cure.

Hijikata plied the murky waters of society's fringes to find a working method and ready source of material, coming of age through avant-garde dance and a marginalized economic

subculture, employed variously as a longshoreman, junk dealer, and other lowly occupations. Unlike Hosoe, Hijikata had only moved to Tokyo full-time in 1952 at age 24. His lack of high-level dance training and asymmetrical physique (one leg was slightly shorter than the other) prevented him from obtaining the career in mainstream modern dance to which he aspired, thus driving him to turn inward and forge new aesthetic criteria (Kurihara 1996: 17-18). In Hijikata's early career, he did not speak of his rural background so much as a surrealist identity that was urban, anti-capitalist, and criminal:

Eyes intervene in the current generation whose soul too is unable to live merely through the succession of property. (2000: 41)

My dance...is behavior that explicitly flaunts its aimlessness in the face of a production-oriented society. (2000: 44)

I wager reality on a nonsensical vitality that has purged the echo of logic from my body and I dream of the day when I am sent to prison. (2000: 45)

Hijikata created an alternate, imagined Tokyo as an urbanized mental landscape representative of the clash between the dual images of a pre-war, intuitive corporeality and a postwar, industrialized, domesticated body. He spent the period from 1959 to 1968 performing themes of socio-cultural marginalization, with Western-style modernization on one side and, on the other, a dissipating, indigenous, "Japanese" body, newly defined as obsolete at best and criminal at worst. Just as Crapanzano speaks of "imaginative horizons" that feed liminal, dialectic states of being that act as "determinants of...social imaginaries" (2004: 1-15), so Hijikata's Tokyo imaginary was redolent with subliminal, internalized conflict upon which he cast his insecurity, hatred, obsession, and desire, lush with rich metaphors for subverting social norms of beauty, quality, and morality.

By the late 1960s, however, Hijikata was reaching the limits of this imaginary, which, after all, had been designed to crumble under the weight of its own lack of definition. Thus, after 15 years in Tokyo and three years of work on *Kamaitachi*, Hijikata began explicitly utilizing Tohoku references. One might surmise that when Hosoe and Hijikata returned to northern Japan together, they possessed different agendas: nostalgic excavation and filial reconciliation for Hosoe and reimagination and re-purposing of visual-corporeal memory for Hijikata.

The period around *Kamaitachi* represented a bodily shift in Hijikata's festering and fertile hinterland of social marginality from external, typed, and male, to internal, biographical, and female. *Nikutai no Hanran* was his last performance to depict a purely masculine realm. After this and the publication of *Kamaitachi* in 1969, Hijikata moved into an intense period of many years where he developed a lexicon of body imagery ostensibly inspired by his childhood, and he also began choreographing women, one of whom, Ashikawa Yoko, became his leading protégé until his death in 1986. Stories of crawling through rice fields, playing with deadly farming tools, fearing mythical beasts, drunken singing by his father, and alleged sale of his sister into prostitution all contributed to the eventual formation of a loosely codified *butoh-fu* (butoh language) inspired by a highly idiosyncratic Tohoku imaginary. By the premiere in 1972 of *27 Nights for Four Seasons*, a month of Tohoku-inspired performances by his dance company, Hijikata was defining himself less by what he was not and did not have and increasingly by what he was alleged to have experienced and become. This focus on his indigenous imaginary continued until his death in 1986, when he had just completed a new ensemble performance entitled *Tohoku Kabuki*. This work ostensibly combined fantastic childhood memories with the raw aesthetic of pre-Meiji kabuki, a largely working class entertainment until appropriation as a

late 19th Century, bourgeois reconstruction by a government propagating an image of world-class sophistication to Western powers.

Hijkata's gender duality was foreshadowed by his first collaboration with Hosoe, the photo essay *Otoko to Onna (Man and Woman)* (1961). High-contrast, monochrome photos of Hijkata and two female dancers show them mostly in body fragments, with faces, limbs, and torsos juxtaposed to reveal an instinctive sense of gender-based tensions. From this work, the two men continued an intense exploration of a wide range of internalized, domesticated, and intuitive subjectivities.

Hosoe had also set a precedent with *Barakei*, which simultaneously destroyed and created a mythology around Mishima Yukio's iconic persona, thereby preparing for the even more backward-looking and holistic invention of *Kamaitachi*. Speaking of the *Barakei* photo sessions with Mishima, Hosoe has stated:

I thought I would use whatever Mishima loved or owned to form a document on the writer. However, the interpretation and expression would be my own. At our first shoot, I had spoken of an iconoclastic act to Mishima—the destruction of myth—but in fact I was suggesting a creative process *through destruction*. I wanted to create a new image of Yukio Mishima through my photography. (2006: 134)

*Kamaitachi* was therefore a midpoint in Hosoe and Hijkata's mutual progression from rebellion against conventional typologies of physicality, gender, and sexuality to eventual creation of self-styled cosmologies rooted in subjectivized corporeal vocabularies.<sup>13</sup> Is there evidence, however, for these aesthetic shifts in the images themselves? Or do the photos simply stand on their own as powerful works of art, the efficacy of which is dependent on the viewer?

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<sup>13</sup> For Hosoe, the apotheosis of this work was the photo essay, *Embrace*, completed in 1970 and featuring the bodies of many of Hijkata's dancers.

My own opinion is that both factors are at play. While there is nothing in the photos that specifically communicates the idea that Hosoe and Hijikata are working through childhood traumas, I believe each picture's environment directly influences the character of Hijikata's presence. In the city, he is shown clearly at odds with the other inhabitants and surroundings: under a microscope, fleeing through concrete gardens, alone with children's toys, or a devil in the marketplace. In every image, Hijikata is in a tense or oppositional relationship with the people and places around him. There is a constant subtext in the images of looking and "Other."<sup>14</sup> In the countryside, however, he transforms into an elemental force: crawling through shadows, hurtling with the wind, melting into the mud. Villagers mock and fete him. He joins with two brides in absurd and obsessive matrimonial rituals. He dies in captivity, appears again in harvested, denuded fields, and becomes as one with the air and earth, light and darkness.

These stances, gestures, and movements are manufactured entry points, ways of performing and being in and of an *imagined, post-indigenous body* that ostensibly cannot help but transcend its rural foundations and urbanized filters to resolve into a tensile, spontaneous lexicon of memory, subjectivity, and presence. This body is *imagined* because of its semi-fictional basis and *post-indigenous* because Hijikata posited an essentialized, nativist identity off its moorings in an early postmodern world not of its own making. Through Hosoe's biographical framework and aesthetic, Hijikata unveiled his potential for realizing a broader and deeper artistic vision than he had previously attempted. *Kamaitachi* allowed him the freedom to re-visualize his roots into a fantastic yet practical working method that would last until his death

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<sup>14</sup> Butoh dancer and scholar Megan Nicely comments that many of the photos look very posed, "as if they are meant to draw the attentions of the watchers in the photo. The element of being watched is very strong, they are about spectatorship. These are not private moments" (2010).

two decades later.<sup>15</sup> Over those years, Hijikata would come to claim this invented Tohoku landscape first publicly imagined in *Kamaitachi* as the root of his mature choreographic invention.

In *The Lure of the Local* (1998), Lucy Lippard speaks of such a process taking place through one's personal relationship to landscape: "British geographer Denis Cosgrove defines landscape as 'the external world mediated through human subjective experience.' I'd define place that way. A lived-in landscape becomes a place, which implies intimacy; a once lived-in landscape can be a place, if explored, or remain a landscape, if simply observed" (Lippard 1998: 7-8). Hijikata's Tohoku is a once lived-in landscape that becomes subjectively observed, both intimately from within the psyche of first-hand childhood experience, and at a distance from the perspective of his adult future and imagined memories. His mythology, as so many are, is based in a past and future present. Myths are typically synchronic in this manner because they must be available and nominally existent at all times for those who want to believe in them (Cosentino 2009). Lippard also emphasizes the connection between art and place:

Yet a place-specific art is still in its infancy. Of all the art that purports to be *about* place, very little can be said to be truly of place.... I am concerned here only with that which is directly tied to place—with examining the ways art can help us focus on existing places, how their topography and every detail reflects and generates memory and a certain kind of knowledge about nature and culture. (Lippard 1998: 20)

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<sup>15</sup> For example, Nakajima Natsu, one of Hijikata's first students, stated, "Hijikata would tell us: 'Make the face of an old devil woman, with the right hand in the shape of a horn, and the left hand holding her long hair'...then comes the light of the sun, and the eyes become smaller; then comes the wind, and the eyelids quiver; then you must feel like a stone." (Viala and Masson-Sekine 1988: 135)

Yet, on this point as well, we can view *Kamaitachi* and dances based on Hijikata's Tohoku as sited between such an "about" and "of." They are neither explicitly about, that is indexically referencing, nor exactly of, that is wholly rooted in Hijikata's childhood. His Tohoku (as well as Hosoe's) is an invention, a "subjective documentary" conceit, which Hijikata then extended over time by bending the truth of his recollections or through outright lying (Kurihara 1996; Baird 2005).

At root, then, *Kamaitachi* was born out of a desire to resolve, through subjective expression, both authors' *autobiographical* ambivalence around *mother*, *home*, and the divide between their urban cultural life and rural roots. *Kamaitachi* also largely avoids the bald, some would say banal, reality exemplified by Moriyama Daido and Araki Nobuyoshi's headlong dives into their personal universes of compulsive images. By capturing theatrical, carnal, absurd, repulsive, and disturbing images that are yet *fictional and staged* as opposed to literally autobiographical, Hosoe and Hijikata possibly evade the worst accusations of over-indulgent egos and self-absorption. Aside from *Kamaitachi*'s artistic qualities, the project stands as one of the consummate examples of postwar Japanese art in that it resonated with some of the essential socio-cultural issues of its time and place.

After *Kamaitachi*, Hijikata and Hosoe went on to even greater levels of activity and notoriety. Hijikata established his dance company, Ankoku Butoh-Ha, and choreographed regularly throughout the 1970s. Ironically, the performances engendered by his aesthetic principles and visual forms pronounced and practiced in this period became the basis of a stereotyped butoh "style" that continues modishly through the present day within much of the

Japanese and international performance communities and the minds of many critics.<sup>16</sup> For his part, Hosoe continued after *Kamaitachi* to devise highly stylized, studio-based abstractions and subjective documentary projects. His seminal work with Hijikata, however, continues to inspire butoh-based practitioners around the globe and stands, in the words of one longtime, American student, as “image words that tell me everything I need to know about dance” (Candelario 2009).

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<sup>16</sup> As butoh artist Mizu Desierto comments, “I think the biggest danger is a need that so many people feel that has put butoh in so many boxes already. It’s fundoshi. It’s white body paint. It’s grotesque. It’s a man. You know, whatever these things are culturally, and those shows are the most boring fucking repetitive pieces of shit out there as far as I’m concerned” (Desierto 2011).

## **Altar**

*I've been staring at a poster over my desk for 19 years. It contains a photo of Ohno Kazuo taken by Hosoe Eikoh, and I can't take my eyes off of it.*

*I'm not sure what I usually notice first. Is it the perfectly upright body broken only by the slightly turned out left hand and head tilted to the right? Is it the perfectly balanced and subtle tones of gray, white, and black that invite me in to this man's universe as well as keep me at a distance with their otherworldly feel? Is it the two cracks in the wall; a thick one emerging vertically from behind Ohno's head and the other traversing horizontally above, a signifier of a cross perhaps?*

*Or other small details. The old, worn shoes. The cheap linoleum floor. The unbuttoned collar with no tie. The right hand slightly clawing inward. His aged, thinning, crumpling hair. It all leaves me with a feeling of simultaneous desire and emptiness that keeps me coming back for more...*

## **Product and Prophecy: What Came and Went and Never Was**

In his book, *Like a Rollin' Stone: Bob Dylan at the Crossroads* (2005), Greil Marcus examines the significance of the song "Like a Rollin' Stone" for American art, culture, and society.

Though the original recording was released in 1965, Marcus asserts that its subversive and catalytic cultural inheritance was already in play from rock and roll's genesis in the 1940s and continued manifesting for decades to come. Moreover, he speaks of the song as transforming these elements into something both absolutely of its historical moment (not only of the mid-1960s or even of that recording date, but that specific studio take as the only perfect distillation *ever* of the song's full potential) as well as of its own imagined future.

Marcus cites Pisaro in speaking of an artwork that aspires to history via both prediction and causation: "But like a Geiger counter developing a will of its own, it wavers between trying to record the coming quake and trying to *make it happen*" (Marcus 2005: 8). The idea implies that all great works of art that are seminal historical products are also self-fulfilling prophecies and absolutely of their time in relation to the grand scheme of history. Again, past and future present.

*Kamaitachi* stakes a similar claim. By creating and then retroactively evoking and invoking an archaic cosmology (like Dylan's mutating folk and poetic rock music) that ostensibly gives insight into a current and/or coming storm, past, present, and future are thereby conflated by an *actor-provocateur* into a social imaginary within which others may then somehow perceive themselves as related to or residing. For some, such as those with an investment in normative culture, this message can come as a warning. For others on the margins, it may be a sudden or renewed reason to live.

While *Kamaitachi* stands in art history as a defining moment in postwar Japanese art, for butoh artists it is mostly Hijikata's Tohoku identity, not Hosoe's, that defines the work. For them, the photos may be less designed images with *aesthetic* immanence and more a source of knowledge full of *psychic* immanence. While Hijikata did write down hundreds of pages of working notes and essays, he never published his *butoh-fu* or publicly codified a set training method. Butoh practice is an ever-fluid space of idiosyncratic engagement between the psychic and corporeal selves, typically more concerned with the nature of presence and identity than clear formation of artistic expression. Thus, a few dozen photos and a handful of film clips and oblique public statements are all most practitioners have ever witnessed of Hijikata in the quarter-century since his death. This has made the *Kamaitachi* images a key reference for the self-definition of butoh, mentally processed by countless students and dancers who accept them as a fundamental part of their collective definition of *who and what* Hijikata was. In analyzing butoh photos, especially of the movement's founding generation of artists and their first student-performers, one might surmise that many later-generation practitioners look to these images for gnosis from the roots of butoh itself. This desire drives many practitioners to bestow legitimacy on such photos as a kind of sacred text replete with alluring, obfuscating surfaces, infinite, undefinable depths, and an aching, unresolving physicality.

Returning to Barthes, looking to the past in this manner is akin to sitting between the amateur and professional photographer's gaze: "It is the amateur...who is the assumption of the professional: for it is he who stands closer to the *noeme* of photography," what Barthes defines as "that-has-been," or "the Intractable," as a past existential state that he equates with personal truth (1981: 99, 77, 98). Barthes further asserts that because amateurs look to the past that exists

apart from and despite themselves, they are sentimental and subjective, while professionals look to the future that can or will exist because of them and are therefore rational and objective.

In analyzing the production of knowledge and meaning in photography, John Berger states: “Certainty may be instantaneous; doubt requires duration; meaning is born of the two. An instant photographed can only acquire meaning insofar as the viewer can read into it a duration extending beyond itself. When we find a photograph meaningful, we are lending it a past and a future” (Berger and Mohr 1982: 89). Berger’s thesis implies an existential symbiosis between photo and viewer. Not only does the viewer’s act of perception and interpretation give meaning to the photo, but the distance in time between the implied death of the photo’s instant and the birth of action inherent in the viewer’s perception grants life to the latter as well.

The stillness of photos—their seeming out-of-time-ness—also allows viewers to control their own psychological distance from the images. In the most negative sense, this permits escapism and a lack of criticality resistant to certain worlds perceivable in photos, such as social injustice visible at street level or the inhumanity of torture, war, and genocide. This distance can, however, also enable us to critically access and make possible a deeper sense of witnessing, marking a viewed image, in critic Susie Linfield’s words, as “a fantasy that we need—in order to contemplate, to think, to engage” (Linfield 2010: 164). Photo as fantasy brings us into the realm of the poetic, making photo-viewing an act of fantasizing the Other through the photo-object. In terms of the essence of poetic encounter, Bachelard explains this psycho-temporal phenomenon in terms of daydreams, or what we might call “conscious dreaming”:

By the swiftness of its actions, imagination separates us from the past as well as from reality; it faces the future. To the *function of reality*, wise in experience of the past, as it is defined by traditional psychology, should be added a *function of unreality*, which is

equally positive.... Any weakness in the function of unreality, will hamper the productive psyche. If we cannot imagine, we cannot foresee. (1994: xxxiv)

The nexus of this relationship between “experience of the past” and “the productive psyche” in photographic perception and identification is what W.J.T. Mitchell describes as the “image-text,” a visual entity not only capable of being *read* in terms of its past—situating the image in its historical context—but also, and rather, *made* relevant by the user in a manner desired or necessary for knowledge. In other words:

To *anachronize*, to bring the image into the present, and perhaps to see what future it opens up. The image, and imagination, “goes before us” as the Israelites say when they ask the artist, Aaron, to create an idol to express their tribal, national identity. It is also what a scientist does when he creates a model, a schematism to explain a phenomenon.

The imagination, in other words, is the first step on the road to understanding. (2010: 12)

Such a mental maneuver may be a function of our second-nature tendency to interpret and assign a place in our cosmology to everything we see. Thus, in engaging with butoh photos, practitioners look to the past in order create their futures, making their relationship with viewed photos a dialectic between objective and subjective perception, which represent death on the one hand and birth on the other. By perceiving facts (Barthes’s *studium*), i.e. stasis, we destroy what is there, by nature actually mutable and impermanent. By perceiving idiosyncratic impressions (Barthes’s *punctum*), i.e. ambiguous, unstable reality, we generate meaning and imagine immanence, which arises in the fertile liminal space between the image and our desires.

*All of which makes me wonder, when I consider the photo in the poster that I love, am I killing something, or am I giving birth?*

*The face, of course.*

*Pasty white makeup. 80 years of wrinkles. Eyes sunken and still, yet searching. Lips edging downward, unparted, perhaps never smiling. A clown without a stage. Neither beauty nor beast. More the image of seeming absence while remaining the embodiment of presence. He's definitely there, but perhaps defining a form of life that most would count as dead and gone.*

*One thing I know for certain that instills a soft, gentle viscosity in me is Ohno's shadow. If his body, his apparition, impresses at all, it is because of the contrast between it and the clarity of his shadow, impossible without the presence of something, his referent, so ghostlike...*

### **Butoh in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction**

Throughout *Camera Lucida*, Barthes refers to a photo of his mother when she was five years old and standing in a winter garden setting. His sense of the enduring emanation of love from this image is based on his belief in photo-immanence, a perceptual phenomenon contingent on his punctum, based on the operation of his desires. Barthes seems to assert that photos are ultimately no more or less than what we make of them, and he highlights a crisis state engendered by this truth: "I am the reference of every photograph, and this is what generates my astonishment in addressing myself to the fundamental question: why is it that I am alive *here and now?*" (1981: 84)

Like Barthes staring at his mother, I see death and liminality in the poster image of Ohno, not only because of his ghostly visage, but also his perhaps too perfectly composed stance in relation to the light, the wall, and Hosoe's camera. Also liminal, however, due to the ambiguity of its subject, Ohno's barely dancing body, an irresolute studium not easily circumscribed.

Because my relationship to the image necessarily involves my embodiment—my version—of Ohno’s artistic and cultural identity, it also contains elements of identification and desire: an indescribable, purely imagined longing. This poster has sat over my desk for nearly two decades as a singular possession through four relationships and seven homes, yet I still have no idea what it means other than that its punctum within me alleges a rising from near-death, a perennial state of dying and becoming. This mechanically-reproduced object is situated in my life much like an altarpiece, or as a devotional image might be for others, and as such, it can be said to possess an *aura*.

This cycle of dying and becoming when engaging the perceived sacred energy of aura within visual objects may also drive the ebb and flow of negotiating one’s place within a social power dynamic and thereby make the process fundamental to self-identification. In speaking of immanence within Christian iconography, David Morgan points to this phenomenon as *visual piety*:

What is most real: the image of Jesus? The historical Jesus? Or the essence of Christ, the idea or spiritual reality that corresponds to the believer’s recognition of the picture and affirming utterance? Believers don’t have to choose among these; instead they compile them in their devotional gaze. The power of visual piety consists in enhancing the immanence of the spiritual referent through the image, reifying it, and merging it with a concept of the historical Jesus. (1999: 43)

Scholar and butoh dancer Alessandra Santos recalls perceiving a similar potency in the *Kamaitachi* images when she first witnessed them: “I saw the photos before seeing films of Hijikata dancing, so the static images of the dancer captured perfectly his movements before I saw him actually moving. The photos demonstrate so well Hijikata’s energy and demonic force,

even when he was clearly still” (2009). Up to the present day, Santos draws personal inspiration from this encounter:

Hijikata running with a baby in his arms in the fields was etched in my mind forever... I feel that Hijikata is offering the baby to the gods in sacrifice, or maybe he is escaping, knowing that there is no escape from fate. It's very mytho-poetic and perhaps even a little desperate and aware of the human condition, it's existential and sublime at the same time. It's like Hijikata is a messenger, a reminder; through his dance he reminds us there are infinite possibilities and dimensions beyond our understanding, and yet everyone knows it. Hosoe was able to capture the multitudes Hijikata produced in his dance. (2009)

According to Allen and Mary Nooter Roberts, devotees of a given sacred practice may be capable of cultivating agency through processes like visual piety, such as in the West African Mourides' active seeking out of *baraka* (from the Arabic), “a form of divine intervention available through visual imagery,” from devotional images of their saint, Amadou Bamba (2003: 24). The Roberts write, “Above all else, Mourides feel that *baraka/aura* does things: it works, changes, and helps” (2003: 26).

Walter Benjamin's conception of aura, as the perceived psycho-energetic quality in an artwork to which society has granted legitimacy, relies on a work's “presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be,” or, in other words, “The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity” (2001: 20). Benjamin asserted that an artwork's mechanical reproduction and perceptual repetition necessarily reduced the impact of its aura while simultaneously democratizing its remaining aesthetic effects, but this idea refuses consideration of the individual viewer's experience of the work, regardless of its homogeneous qualities. Can we not also conceive of an “original” state defined by a viewer's subjective

perception and relationship to a reproduction? Indeed, as the Roberts have asserted about Mourides' assumption of agency through their active interpretation and use of saint imagery, "What may appear to be the circumstantial details of photographs can be concretized, rendered 'eternal,' and thrust before us as objects of ongoing interpretation" (2003: 47). What if a given photo's aura were experienced, not in relation to its status within a unique print object, but rather through the essential fact of the subject being framed and displayed, desired and expressed? Can we not say that the objective facts of a studium, when taken in by the viewer, also contain the seed of a punctum's effect and serve as the root and path of its subjective perception? In her essay, "The Survival of the Aura," artist-scholar Petra Kuppers examines this logical extension of Benjamin's thesis: "The decay of the aura might just be the advent of another auratic event: the encounter of spectator and work of art. This encounter always has at its heart the 'unapproachable': the inability to fill the void in the subject in search of recognition" (2001: 40).

Many theorists have spoken of photography as possessing a "deadly" nature, as causing the death of the moment and, therefore, its aura as well. As Susan Sontag stated, "all photographs are *memento mori*. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt" (1978: 15). A few months before writing *Camera Lucida*, Barthes expressed his interest in photography as "tinged with necrophilia, to be honest, a fascination with what has died but is represented as wanting to be alive" (Batchen 2009: 9).

The fact, not only of photography's reproducibility, but such a characteristic in addition to the implicit and eventual decay and "death" of every photographic subject in time, begs the question of whether it is possible for the image's auratic singularity to draw directly from the subject. Writing on Derrida's eulogistic essay, "The Deaths of Roland Barthes" (1981), in which

Derrida speaks of his own experience of the punctum effect, Kas Saghafi notes, “For Derrida, it would be more accurate to say that the photograph does not serve as evidence for the Referent itself—as if such a thing ever existed—but for a structure of reference to the absolute singularity of the other” (Saghafi 2010: 88). In other words, a photo’s subject (its referent) and its meaning in the mind of the viewer is inseparable from the process—the very *act*—of *reference* committed by the viewer.

This process is evident in postwar Japanese art employing subjective identification and social imaginaries, such as Terayama’s perennially refashioned Aomori, Abe’s oppressively depersonalizing Japan, or Hosoe and Hijikata’s netherworldly Tohoku. Such artists recast their subjects into new shapes—into altogether *new* subjects—through the transforming modality of the referencing act, illustrating what Alfred North Whitehead, in echoing John Locke, spoke of as an ambivalent “doctrine of organism,” an “attempt to describe the world as a process of generation of individual actual entities, each with its own absolute self-attainment. This concrete finality of the individual is nothing else than a decision referent beyond itself” (1979: 60).

What may more readily determine a photo-image’s generativeness is its perception and engagement with the mind and desire of the viewer, which may produce not a renewed or revived aura, but an altogether new aura or imagined immanence. As Saghafi describes, “the structure of *reference* carries or bears the other and carries back to the other. Photography thus refers to *and* suspends that which it refers to, the absolute singularity of the other” (Saghafi 2010: 89). We might say that the backward-looking singularity of the viewer/other is what, paradoxically, engenders the forward-leaning singularity of the subject/referent.

Moreover, if photography is indeed both deadly as well as generative, then this fact implies a liminal state generated by photographic perception. Within the image co-exist life and

death since, just like the viewer's identity, they are processes in constant flux. Such an engagement for butoh artists, however, is not so much a devotional or worshipful act as it is one of resonance, of seeing that which one feels may be somehow already within the self of one's everyday life. Diana L. Eck, in speaking of the manner in which Hindu practitioners experience the divine by taking *darshan*, or "seeing" the divine within both those people they consider to be living embodiments of divinity as well as man-made images of deities, describes a comparable framework: "The day to day life and ritual of Hindus is based not upon abstract interior truths, but upon the charged, concrete, and particular appearances of the divine in the substance of the material world" (Eck 1998: 11).

As discussed above, butoh photos, produced as performative entities and circulated publicly as consumable images and objects, are also made to be seen, and this is true even of those images, as Katsura Kan has indicated, of the dark side of one's humanity. Susie Linfield speaks of the necessary individuality of such a process, just as many postwar Japanese artists called for subjective experience of personal and social truth, as well as the need for such images to be seen, to be purposely witnessed, as when viewing photos of incredible suffering:

The Holocaust was designed to be an event without witnesses: to exterminate a people and erase the memory of the crime.... This is why, no matter how searing, repellent, or soul-crushing these photographs, I feel a small sense of grim satisfaction when I look at them. To see, to acknowledge, to study, to know: we cannot bring back the murdered millions, but we can defeat Hitler's plan for a kind of cosmic forgetting. (2010: 97)

These examples illustrate the punctum effect whereby the viewer feels and finds the root of the image's aura within her- or himself. Ideally, this makes butoh photography an engagement between visual culture and embodiment by cultivating an awareness of how to appropriate and

transform the often self-consuming tendencies of postmodern visuality, as in the case of hegemonic mythologies, through the body as a ritual of affliction.

*Kamaitachi* is a raw formula and template for such a method. It may have been the first major instance of butoh's engagement with photo-visuality, which acts as a mirror, a framing device for orienting the body into a psycho-physiological state that reflects and extends the image(s) upon which one is focused.<sup>17</sup> Butoh can create a universe of imagery as a hall of mirrors that serves as a multi-perspectival reflection of being, rather than an escape into anonymity or self-exile into moral oblivion, as in Benjamin's glass universe of the Parisian arcades (Benjamin 1999: 538).<sup>18</sup> Each successive image one delves into, rather than moving one away from one's self, brings one's consciousness, and by extension that of the audience, closer to one's reality.

### **Moving Memory**

Turning to practitioners' experience with butoh photos, we can see how this process manifests in varying contexts. Alessandra Santos recalls the *Kamaitachi* photos as being fundamental to her initial comprehension of butoh as a form of self-actualization:

I first saw Hosoe's images in the late 1990s when I was learning about Hijikata and butoh.

They were intriguing and alluring aesthetically, but also haunting and revealing Hijikata's

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<sup>17</sup> While *Otoko to Onna (Man and Woman)* in 1961 was Hosoe and Hijikata's first major collaboration and did take place after Hijikata began staging his early butoh performances, the essay represents a more raw, basic, and aesthetically experimental stage in both artists' developments as opposed to the mature opus of *Kamaitachi*, which was developed over three years and expressed an entire cultural mythos.

<sup>18</sup> "Let two mirrors reflect each other; then Satan plays his favorite trick and opens here in his way (as his partner does in lovers' gazes) the perspective on infinity. Be it now divine, now Satanic; Paris has a passion for mirror-like infinities." (Benjamin 1999:538)

iconic identity and dance. Hijikata running through the fields as a demon with a halo of light captures perfectly the “possessed” state of the dancer. I think I only saw a few images from the book then, but what stuck with me was Hijikata dancing hunched forward, stepping like a peasant, or leaping, or playing, emblematic of becoming someone else to dance in someone’s steps, again evoking possession or total empathy, or perhaps that is the secret to become oneself fully? (2009)

Jay Hirabayashi, Co-Artistic Director of Kokoro Dance in Vancouver, Canada, recalls his experience with various butoh images during his early practice in the 1980s:

I had a book of pictures of butoh stuff, and I read Jean Viala, who put out a book, and I read what he said butoh was. The first book was in Japanese, so I couldn’t read the text, but the pictures were amazing. So we would look at the pictures, and I had done one workshop. We just decided we would try to do what we imagined butoh was. So I shaved my head, we painted ourselves white. I made some dances where I was moving very slowly. And after, when I finally did get to take Kazuo Ohno’s class, he said don’t imitate me, and don’t use any technique. So I thought that actually when we started we were doing the right thing. (2010)

Alternately, Heyward Bracey, a Los Angeles-based dancer, reveals a similar connection to *Kamaitachi* after hearing a story from his teacher about Hijikata’s supposed epiphany upon returning to his home village:

In sharing Hijikata's story he managed to include me somehow in a "lineage" of cultural transmission that had begun...when Hijikata encountered something more substantial than he had previously known...in the body of his father on the roads of his village. My teacher said that Hijikata had "found his own country.".... Having a direct connection to

a pivotal experience of Hijikata's puts the photographs in a whole other category of experience. When viewing them I'm looking at images that tap into my connection with Hijikata's epiphany, which has had an impact on my own personal and artistic life. (2010)

As Lippard states, "Photographs are about memory—or perhaps about the absence of memory, providing pictures to fill voids, illustrating our collective memory" (1997: 20). Sontag describes this phenomenon even more deeply:

The familiarity of certain photographs builds our sense of the present and immediate past. Photographs lay down routes of reference, and serve as totems of causes: sentiment is more likely to crystallize around a photograph than around a verbal slogan....

Photographs that everyone recognizes are now a constituent part of what a society chooses to think about, or declares that it has chosen to think about. It calls these ideas "memories," and that is, over the long run, a fiction. Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as collective memory. (2003: 85)

Add to this notion Pierre Nora's cautionary on the authoritarianism of history as a discipline, and we begin to see the challenge that a "subjective documentary," i.e. an assertively true, personal memory, represents to such authority:

From the chroniclers of the Middle Ages to today's practitioners of "total" history, the entire tradition has developed as the controlled exercise and automatic deepening of memory, the reconstitution of a past without lacunae or faults... each historian was convinced that his task consisted in establishing a more positive, all-encompassing, and explicative memory. History's procurement, in the last century, of scientific methodology has only intensified the effort to establish critically a "true" memory. Every great historical revision has sought to enlarge the basis for a collective memory. (1989: 9)

Unlike objectivizing historians, Hosoe conceived *Kamaitachi* from the start as a reconstitution of his and Hijikata's pasts *with* lacunae and faults, something ambivalent, insecure, and haunted by wartime and childhood memories to satisfy the aesthetic and nostalgic desire of only the artists themselves:

I wanted to return back to the country to photograph, but not as a realistic documentary, but from my sight, from my eyes. Because it is a memory. Can photography create memories? That was also my question. Also my curiosity. Maybe yes, maybe not. No one had tried to record memories. Just always trying to record other realities.... It's a little bit complicated. It is a matter of photography. It is a matter of just a boy. (2010)

Now that *Kamaitachi* and thousands of other butoh photos have settled into the public realm and affected countless practitioners, students, and viewers of both the photos and performances, butoh has established itself as an artistic and social practice. Individuals since the 1960s have referred to their own memories through experiencing the fictional reconstructions of performers and photographers, a mutual and implicitly communal reinvention of selves that is the inverse process of history, described by Nora as a "form of memory" coming "to us from the outside; because it is no longer a social practice, we interiorize it as an individual constraint" (1989: 14). Butoh is a form of memory that comes to us from inside, and because it is a social practice born of individually reduced constriction when performed, it is exteriorized in those moments as a liberatory gesture. Butoh has become, in its largest meaning, a social movement in opposition to history as dominance and, on its most intimate level, a method for holistic self-reflection and self-knowledge through one's body and across one's past, present, and future. It is a practice of framing "collective memory" not as a singular portrait of history itself but an aggregate of individual, subjective memories, with each practitioner creating their artistic persona out of such

memories. Each artist, in a sense, creates their own *Kamaitachi*, just as Hijikata and Hosoe each did:

That was my personal document of my memories as well as Hijikata's, and hopefully it would let ordinary people think that those were part of their memories. This is also a record of, not the reality, but the psychology of the photographer. And your interpretation is free. The purpose of my photography is not to persuade people. It's not to make them think the same way as I do. I'll give you one good example...Marc Chagall. When I had the chance to see his retrospective exhibition...I came to the conclusion, "Oh, that is *his* *Kamaitachi*." So I understood his works very clearly.... My work is very personal.

Chagall is very personal too. (Hosoe 2010)

Similarly, in *Camera Lucida*, Barthes repeatedly acknowledges the unstable ground on which "objective" memory lies and makes a clarion call for subjective truth through the viewer's embodied presence as the ultimate mode of knowledge production and comprehension of reality. As he exhorts, "let us abolish the images, let us save immediate desire (desire without mediation)" (1981: 119). Barthes also warns against photos that only present the static representation of desire: "Pleasure passes through the image; here is the great mutation" (1981: 118). He gives primacy to photos that are themselves the actualization of desire, such as the winter garden photo is for his nostalgic desire for his dead mother's presence. For Barthes, if photos are what we make of them, then what we make—what we produce with the labor of our "loving and terrified consciousness"—is "*ecstasy*" (1981: 119).

We may ask, therefore, from where would practitioners draw essential and ongoing inspiration for the endless redefinition and renewal of their practice if not from material like *Kamaitachi* as a practical source and motivational force? As Thomas Csordas has postulated,

people's active imagination of the sacred in their lives "is defined not by the capacity to have such experiences, but by the human propensity to thematize them as radically other" (1988: 34). Our experience of the sacred is often defined by our desire for sacredness in others. Just as diasporic Tibetan Buddhist nationals find immanence in any reproduction of the Dalai Lama's photo (Harris 2004: 142), so many butoh-based practitioners find inherent inspiration in *Kamaitachi* and other butoh photos in books, magazines, exhibits, and films. In this way, we "know" iconic personae such as Hijikata, Ohno, and others in the context of *our own* imaginary of their lives within their memory space and butoh's postwar roots. For if Hijikata, as butoh's prime exemplar, did not come from his invented, post-indigenous, Tohoku imaginary, how else might we know where we come from?

### **To the Present**

Despite its "alternative" status, butoh has achieved wide acceptance as an art form since the 1980s, especially in the West, where butoh-based artists occasionally perform on mainstages and in festivals and other mainstream venues. Given the political dimensions of butoh in 1960s Japan and the introduction of Japanese practitioners to the Western performing arts market in the 1970s and 1980s and its effects on their respective practices, what might be an appropriate frame through which to view the tensions and harmonies playing out in the contemporary transnational butoh performance community?

One possibility is the interplay of nationalist identities and archetypes with which Hijikata marked butoh practice from its beginnings and that have now become actively addressed by both Japanese/Asian and American/Western practitioners. Where Hijikata and other artists reacted to and against American and Western identity decades ago, so American and Western

practitioners now often feel a need to address butoh's ostensible identity as a Japanese art form (see Chapter 3, "Desire," for more discussion).

Transnational identity is often rooted in and formed by intercultural tensions between seemingly stable yet indeterminate national and local identities. In discussing the structural and processual dimensions of modern ethnicity, Arjun Appadurai notes that national and local ethnic identities are often defined as a "primordial" reaction to the hegemony of outside forces, thus positing the image of an inner-outer dialectic that is perhaps more properly identified as *implosion*, a drawing inward in reaction to external forces) and *explosion*, a concomitant outward expression of newly self-reified, national or local identity (Appadurai 1996: 156-157). In this way, we might interpret many of the Japanese postwar avant-gardists, including photographers, visual artists, filmmakers, and the first butoh artists, as resorting, implosion-like, to a retreat from late capitalist social structures into an aesthetic and subcultural realm that was at first primitivist and later distilled down to pre-modern and archaic.

When this aesthetic and subculture are then carried abroad in the transnational diaspora of artistic forms, butoh since the 1980s may be largely characterized as the tail-end of an explosion of expressivity that began in the mid-1960s. It is also an articulated expression of ethnic identity that many Western viewers have essentialized as an "authentic" Japanese body and primordial soul, thus reifying even further the dark mythos of butoh crafted by Hijikata that began as not simply a positive reinforcement of a nativist identity but a negation of mainstream modern Western culture. In other words, the history of butoh, and in fact much of postwar Japanese avant-garde art, may be seen as a see-saw of reductive perception and inscription of the "other" on both sides of the Pacific. For better or worse, this is the dialectic from which butoh gained its power and many of its practitioners continue to draw.

Such ethnic and subcultural tensions arising from transnational flows may also inspire practitioners to create a purposeful ambivalence around self-definition. Lila Abu-Lughod asks for a heightened reflexivity and self-questioning from those whose identity is inscribed within the terms of a dominant power structure as situated inside and outside, simultaneously embodying “self” at the center and the “other” on the margins. This split self points to the need to resolve crucial questions of *positionality*, *audience*, and *power* inherent in all self/other distinctions: “Standing on shifting ground makes it clear that every view is a view from somewhere and every act of speaking a speaking from somewhere” (Abu-Lughod 1991: 140-141).

Hijikata’s example of in/out status points to such an identity as a crisis state and yet another instance of butoh’s engagement with embodied tension and violence between a hegemonically-inscribed exterior and an immanent interior, regardless of how pure or impure that interior is defined. It may be a psycho-physiological schizophrenia, in other words, or a radically composed mind/body dichotomy. In some sense, becoming a split self, at least onstage, is what butoh is all about.

Through butoh’s core mandate of intentional and explicit engagement with a split self, one may also push back against other reified binaries such as racial orientations and cultural exotifications employed by those inside and outside of cultural and political boundaries. Such deliberate mixing, which exposes the inherent falsehoods of anything approaching mono-cultural—and, therefore, hierarchical—identity, is comparable to the manner in which Mexican writer and performance artist Guillermo Gomez-Peña speaks of borderization and globalization: “Since the arrival of the Europeans to the not-so-New World, Latin American culture and the Spanish language have always been ‘impure,’ syncretic, and hybrid. Latino culture has always

fed on the flesh and form of the other, and this cannibalism might be the very source of our strength” (2001: 119). Gomez-Peña’s approach to performance art strongly echoes and clearly summarizes that of butoh artists: “We are the illegitimate mestizo children of art, theatre and literature, of ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture, and our job is to remain open to new influences, not to set fixed theoretical parameters. In fact, the strength of performance lies in its indefinable nature, in its hybrid and ever-changing nature. The day you can define it, it stops being performance” (2001: 119).

### **My Butoh**

Once Hijikata established a company of dancers and began to choreograph regularly by the early 1970s, it was as much influenced by the mythical social imaginary he created around his alleged roots in rural poverty in the bone-cold backwaters of Tohoku and over a decade’s involvement in Tokyo’s avant-garde art scene as it was around any supposed “Japanese” body that he proposed. Moreover, many are familiar with the stereotyped image of the butoh dancer that has developed ever since: nearly-naked bodies covered in white makeup moving methodically, writhing in psychic pain, crazed facial expressions denoting dark primal urges and a loss of reason, and the like. Butoh is much more than this superficial image, but this perception has been perpetuated over the decades by much of the viewing public as well as dance journalists.

Moreover, my own performance work has been created, presented, consumed, perceived, and analyzed in this context. As an American practitioner of butoh-based performance for 17 years, I am my own primary case study, a defined, packaged, presented self negotiating the indeterminate realm between embodiment and expression. Starting in Los Angeles in the mid-1990s and then nationally and internationally since 1999, I have created solo and ensemble

works in butoh-based dance theater. At first, I drew on the few stock references I could find in books, newspapers, and magazines and a single performance viewing each of Ohno Kazuo and Tanaka Min, and my work reflected this simplistic impression. Since then, I have drawn upon a wider range of sources, yet fundamentally on my own idiosyncratic likes, dislikes, obsessions, fantasies, and—especially—body.<sup>19</sup> Just as Hijikata could not make his off-kilter physicality conform to ballet or modern dance conventions, so I could not ultimately make my mostly suburban Los Angeles and Japanese-American sensibilities genuinely conform to those of Hijikata or Ohno.

I wasn't raised in Japan in a cold, northern town as Hijikata or Ohno were, nor was I connected to the landscape from which Tanaka draws inspiration, or attracted to the stage conventions of Western European high culture with which Sankai Juku has aligned itself. My native culture was not invaded by the agents of Western hegemony. My native culture *is* Western hegemony, from its mass-mediated constructs to its chosen Others, and the tensions I've experienced and subcultures from which I've drawn inspiration lie within its realm. I grew up with a steady diet of bland Seventies pop music and MGM musicals, funk music and European art cinema. I learned hip-hop "popping" dance as a teenager, and the one big audition in my life, for a Madonna world tour, ended in a dismal, Jerry Lewis-like attempt at a fairly straightforward jazz routine. I also have no formal training in dance or theater and came to performance relatively late, at age 27, through performance classes with Rachel Rosenthal, my then future mentor and director, and also workshops with butoh-based dancers Oguri and Roxanne

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<sup>19</sup> I often speak to audiences and students of my genetic abnormality of having an extra joint connecting my bottom lumbar vertebra to my sacrum as a "seed," or primary motivational force of the asymmetrical, arrhythmic movement that characterizes my dance style.

Steinberg, with whom I trained in Body Weather Laboratory technique, as developed by Tanaka Min.

Otherwise, I'm essentially self-trained and draw equally from all of the aesthetic influences of my life. In recent years, I have developed my own training method based increasingly on concepts loosely drawn and even more loosely interpreted from butoh practice as well as Zen Buddhism and gradually less on stereotypical images of butoh. Moreover, my current practice focuses on what I hope to accomplish for performers and viewers, namely, embodying any number of triadic tensions based on narrative, character, persona, or socio-cultural reference, while allowing these tensions to play out in the space of perceptual and signifying push and pull between performer and audience. Reflection, contemplation, opening, vulnerability, and questioning are my priorities on the way to my—and I believe butoh's—ultimate goal of providing paths to *crisis resolution*, even if not literally achieving this state in practice.

I'm drawn less by the now-hackneyed image of a fetishized dance of darkness than by a dialectic process of cycling dualities such as tension/release, balance/imbalance, and illness/healing, that I view as innate on both micro and macro levels in all humans. Exploration of one's self—one's *instrument* of identification—through butoh-based training can address these dualities by engaging aspects of socialization and domestication in physical and mental behavior and also the very biological life processes that flow ever onward. As artist Derek Jarman states in “Blue”—his final film and testament before succumbing to AIDS in 1994—“What need of so much news from abroad while all that concerns either life or death is all transacting and at work within me?” (1994).

Who or what exactly this “me” is holds the key to answering the question. If all that concerns either life or death really does lie within oneself as Barthes, Jarman, Hijikata, or so many others have contended, we require a theory to comprehend the space and time—the “place”—of such an entity. If, as we have seen, butoh embraces and resists definition, if it embodies and negates duality, then we need this place to encompass this paradox.

We need an empty room.

## CHAPTER 3

### AN EMPTY ROOM

*April 1998. Venice Beach, California.*

*Cows don't generally wade through rapids, stand on their hind legs, or piss into the wind and rain, yet here I am.*

*Oguri has assigned us an image, and our only task, however long it takes, is to fully embody it—to follow its “story” through to its logical end. Of course, this process depends entirely upon each individual workshop participant’s body. There’s a woman in the class who grew up on a farm, and I imagine her cow may be evoked by clear, visceral memories from her childhood. As for me, however, I grew up in the heart of the city. For me, it’s Gary Larson. I can’t help thinking of that hilarious *Far Side* cartoon where a herd of cows is always standing except when a car drives by. I’ve always thought that one of the great things about Larson’s humor is that he so often reveals the assumptions people make about not only human nature but nature itself.*

*So here I am, in a brand new, gorgeously renovated dance studio around the corner from high-rent boutiques, furniture stores, and hipster bars in Venice Beach, one of the most expensive neighborhoods in the country, standing precariously upright, as if I am a bovine being trying not to drown in a raging river, urinating against the tide and a torrential storm. After a few minutes, my limbs heaving from the strain, I turn away, exhausted from facing adversity, and my mind’s eye observes my bodily fluid being swept away and disappearing downwind and downstream. I feel my life escaping. I feel simultaneously humbled by the elements and energized by the resentment of feeling a victim. I sense the rhythm of the remaining life force churning silently beneath the battered and deadened surface of my body, attempting to lift muscles, bones, and skin whose energy and purpose have elapsed and expired in absurdity. In this moment, I know nothing, I am incapable, and I am about to die.*

*I feel more alive than ever before.*

*Over the next half hour, inspiration seeps in, one drop at a time, and somehow, as if randomly, joints, organs, blood vessels, and sinew begin gradually twisting and turning my body to face the elements again...*

## Making and Breaking

Butoh is life expression in a chaotic situation. It has a more complicated structure or situation because it's an expression of life.

- Butoh choreographer Otani Iku (2009)

Butoh is a corpse standing up in a desperate bid for life.

- Hijikata Tatsumi (1993: 58)

The theater like the plague is a crisis, which is resolved by death or cure. And the plague is a superior disease because it is a total crisis after which nothing remains except death or an extreme purification.

- Antonin Artaud (1958: 31)

What am I left with after these two decades of corporeal-visual engagement with butoh? More to the point, if butoh practice frames reality through subjective experience—everyday life filtered through one's idiosyncratic body—then I must ask myself what that body is. While we have been presented over the years with many versions of what the body in crisis was for Hijikata, Ohno, and other senior artists, the challenge now for myself as a contemporary practitioner is: What is *my* body in crisis? What is it telling me about the world around me, and how can I process and utilize such information? Regardless of where butoh comes from and what it has been up to now, what is *my* butoh capable of being and for what purpose?

I began this chapter with epigraphs that illustrate the three primary concepts of butoh that my philosophical and artistic practice rest on, namely, *chaos*, *contradiction*, and *crisis*.

Corporeal, epistemological, and socio-political *chaos* instigates a sense of *contradiction* in one's perceived or constructed identity, which results in a *crisis* state of disharmony and conflict. We may also view this process through a lineage of ritual theories that address crisis at the intersection of socialization and human nature. While butoh nominally began as a rebellious gesture against cultural domination, its structure of crisis manifestation is more than a *ritual of*

*rebellion* allowing for institutionalized protest (Gluckman 1963). For a practitioner desiring to embody more than an expressive image, it is also more than Arnold Van Gennep's archetypal *rite de passage* (2004), reaching farther into what Victor Turner called a *ritual of affliction*, in which:

There is a strong element of reflexivity, for through confession, invocation, symbolic reenactment and other means, the group bends back upon itself...not merely cognitively, but with the ardor of its whole being, in order not simply to remember but also to remember its basic relationships and moral imperatives, which have become dismembered by internal conflicts. (1985: 233)

As previously mentioned, butoh artists attempt to engage crisis similarly through a mode of “becoming the thing itself,” which thereby evokes core intuitive values within their physiological and social being. But while embodying crisis is one thing, charging it with the power to affect behavioral, philosophical, or social change in practitioners and audiences is something else. Can comprehension and practice of butoh serve as a template for focusing on broader circumstances beyond the personal and enlarge subjectivity into social engagement? Turner described a ritual of affliction as having a distinct social agenda, aspiring to the creation of a greater openness, coherence, and identity, and being “a passionate attempt to heal the breaches caused by social structural conflict and competition and by egotistical or factional strivings for power, influence, wealth, and so forth by reviving feelings of an underlying bedrock *comunitas*, a generic human relationship undivided by status roles or structural oppositions” (1985: 233). In this chapter, I begin an exploration into the possibility of butoh practice—at least my engagement with and version of it—aspiring to a similar agenda.

While Hijikata occasionally wrote about and spoke of certain political beliefs or attitudes, he did not specifically claim butoh as a political practice in and of itself. He was inspired early on, however, by expressions of recursively transformed social identity, such as writer Jean Genet's conjoining of abjection and beauty, as in his novel, *The Thief's Journal* (1948). Another influence was Antonin Artaud, whose manifesto, *Le Theatre et Son Double (The Theatre and Its Double)* (1932), was published four years after Hijikata's birth and 16 years before Ohno's first solo recital. Artaud cites the potential for staged performance to manifest a form of crisis that can reveal deception and malevolence and elicit personal transformation antidotal to dominant forces:

The theater is a disease because it is the supreme equilibrium which cannot be achieved without destruction.... The action of theater, like that of plague, is beneficial, for, impelling men to see themselves as they are, it causes the mask to fall, reveals the lie, the slackness, baseness, and hypocrisy of our world; it shakes off the asphyxiating inertia of matter which invades even the clearest testimony of the senses; and in revealing to collectivities of men their dark power, their hidden force, it invites them to take, in the face of destiny, a superior and heroic attitude they would never have assumed without it. (1958: 31-32)

By the mid-1970s, with ensemble performances staged regularly at his home theater, Asbestos-Kan, in Tokyo, Hijikata had fully implemented this thesis in his work. In a 1977 interview, renowned theater director Suzuki Tadashi stated that Hijikata had succeeded in creating a mode for cultivating crisis that was more genuinely unstable than "traditional" Japanese arts ostensibly dedicated to the same sense of drama:

When I see noh and such, I no longer feel that fictional perfection exists based on a sense of crisis or in that sense of terror that if you take even one wrong step you will fall backwards into a dreadful abyss.... My first impression of Mr. Hijikata's work was that sense of crisis...that going in such a direction is difficult and also that what emerges from it is quite chancy. Even when a certain relationship comes about, it's really very good because the relationship has a sense of crisis. I rarely get that feeling of chance from the stage. (Hijikata, Senda, and Suzuki 2000: 62-63)

Suzuki's insight points to the fundamental issue, after Max Weber, of *routinization* in the making and consumption of any method of collective communication and interrelation based on expression or "charisma," such as religion, politics, or art (Weber 1991). Classical dance forms like Japanese Noh, Western Ballet, Thai Khon, or Indian Bharata Natyam are just a few of many dances worldwide in which body positions and movements are objectively determined as the foundation for further expressivity and individuality. While numerous variants of Western modern or ballroom dance exist, they are also largely codified in terms of exact or "proper" body positioning, gestural vocabulary, and movement texture.

Genres, styles, and idioms for instigating and/or embodying ambiguities have also developed in every medium, from painting to dance to new media and beyond, but these also often become standardized or fetishized by adherents desiring to regulate the effects of their expressivity. The French Impressionists broke from classical academic painting, but their examples led to decades of newly codified techniques in the 20th Century. The Dogme 95 international collective of filmmakers established a "Vow of Chastity" that, while a somewhat tongue-in-cheek gesture aimed at the high cost of feature film production and mainstream

commercial aesthetics, held artists to a set of “rules” for nominally straightforward, honest, and “authentic” storytelling.<sup>20</sup>

Dance artists who seek to maintain the knife-edge of uncertainty and indeterminacy, therefore, must invent modes that are both more abstract and wider reaching than codifications that set physically specific form and action. While such an approach necessarily and eventually begs the question of routinization—after all, systems are systems—at least directing attention toward the potent and unfathomable is itself always a possibility. An initial step in such a direction may involve orienting one’s practice into the realm of the philosophical.

### **Going In, Going Beyond: Butoh as Philosophy**

SHIBUSAWA: Your “dance of darkness” is a philosophical statement of sorts, isn’t it? When you read poetry or look at paintings, you’re likely to say, “This is butoh.” Does that mean that anything at all can be butoh?

HIJKATA: That’s right. After all, since ancient times solemn ceremonies have gone smoothly only with the help of dance. Paintings, too, are created by human beings and

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<sup>20</sup> Dogme 95: The Vow of Chastity (abridged):

*I swear to the following set of rules drawn up and confirmed by Dogme 95:*

1. *Shooting must be done on location. Props and sets must not be brought in.*
2. *The sound must never be produced apart from the image or vice-versa.*
3. *The camera must be handheld. Any movement or mobility attainable in the hand is permitted.*
4. *The film must be in colour. Special lighting is not acceptable.*
5. *Optical work and filters are forbidden.*
6. *The film must not contain superficial action.*
7. *Temporal and geographical alienation are forbidden.*
8. *Genre movies are not acceptable.*
9. *The film format must be Academy 35mm.*
10. *The director must not be credited.*

*Furthermore I swear as a director to refrain from personal taste. I am no longer an artist. I swear to refrain from creating a 'work', as I regard the instant as more important than the whole. My supreme goal is to force the truth out of my characters and settings. I swear to do so by all the means available and at the cost of any good taste and any aesthetic considerations. (Trischak 1999)*

reveal their ultimate “butoh quality” (*butoh-sei*). Really, it can be seen by anyone. But people stick to their own little world, their own particular genre and lose sight of it. Lots of people are now calling for an end to genres, but if they would just apply the idea of “butoh quality” to everything, the problem would be totally resolved.

- Interview with Hijikata Tatsumi by Shibusawa Tatsuhiko (Hijikata 2000: 49)

In *Butoh: Dance of the Dark Soul* (1987), the first English language book on butoh, published one year after Hijikata’s death, critic Mark Holborn quotes Hijikata as saying, “I come from Tohoku, but there is Tohoku in everybody,” and “There is no philosophy before butoh. It is only possible that a philosophy may come out of butoh” (Hoffman and Holborn 1987: 9). Taken together, these statements and others that Hijikata made indicate that he was, in fact, not wedded to a formalist, ethnic, or perhaps even specifically artistic definition of his work as many of his previous proclamations may lead some to believe. As stated in the previous chapter, Hijikata and Hosoe’s Tohoku imaginary may inspire practitioners not only to activate a productive relationship between their bodies and crisis states but also to invent their own imaginaries to fuel their work. Hijikata’s *butoh-fu* was based on *his* Tohoku, implying that other persons’ imaginaries could serve as the basis for their own butoh-based investigations. If it is unnecessary to adopt Hijikata’s formal imagery and language in order to maintain his basic approach of engaging a body in crisis, then the essence of his practice may carry over to the philosophical realm and manifest as any number of other endeavors. Tanaka Min’s experience of Hijikata supports this concept:

He (Hijikata) would often say something is *butoh-teki*, butoh-like. “Look, isn’t he *butoh-teki*?” he would say or, looking at a dog, “You see, this dog is butoh!” He would find the essence of butoh even in non-human creatures including plants. Movement, technique, and *kata* (form) are merely parts of dance but not all. (2006)

Finding butoh wherever one sees it means one's values and priorities frame one's practice and vice-versa. After 16 years as a practitioner, butoh dancer Mizu Desierto speaks of coming to butoh as the discovery, not of a concretized dance form, but of a psycho-physiological approach to art and healing. She is increasingly concerned with the larger relevances of butoh as a mode of connectivity between self and other beyond the stage:

Butoh came to me at a really interesting time. My father had just passed away unexpectedly...and around the same time I met a dancer who was...integrating butoh forms, so she first gave me the philosophy.

I'm more drawn as I age to butoh as a life practice and how it infuses everything I'm doing, and how I continue to offer that to other people who aren't necessarily dancers even. So I think it's coming from an interest or a need I have to continue to dance and also explore the somatic intelligence that I think the world needs more of, but maybe not through just witnessing me. Maybe more of how people can explore and discover that state of presence with the world around them. (2011)

If butoh can serve as a philosophy, this fact points to broader applications of a butoh-based paradigm. For example, as indicated above, Hijikata could conceive of paintings as revealing a "butoh quality." We may speak of acting or playing music as butoh or through a butoh lens since they are also art forms in which performers may challenge themselves to embody chaos, contradiction, or crisis via language, character, or sound. In her book *A Director Prepares: Seven Essays on Art and Theatre* (2001), Anne Bogart orients her theater practice around the principles of *memory, violence, eroticism, terror, stereotype, embarrassment, and resistance*. Much in the manner of Hijikata, she weaves these concepts together via *imbalance* and *crisis* to fuel her creativity:

Because directing is intuitive, it involves walking with trembling and terror into the unknown.... I have to say, "I know!" and start walking towards the stage. During the crisis of the walk, something *must* happen; some insight, some idea. The sensation of this walk to the stage, to the actor, feels like walking into a treacherous abyss. The walk creates a crisis in which innovation must happen, invention must transpire. I create the crisis in rehearsal to get out of my own way.... In unbalance and failing lie the potential to create. (2001: 86)

Bogart extends her framework and compares her stage experiences to examples outside of theatre in order to demonstrate how similarly crisis operates in performance and other situations:

Most people become highly creative in the midst of an emergency. In the instant of imbalance and pressure, quick and decent solutions to big immediate problems must be found. It is in these moments of crisis that native intelligence and intuitive imagination kick in: the woman who lifts a car because her child is trapped beneath, an inspired strategic choice in the crisis of battle, the quick decisions in the heat of a final rehearsal before a first night audience. I have found that, creatively, imbalance is more fruitful than stability. (2001: 129-130)

Likewise, "the body in crisis" is more than an approach to dance, theatre, or performance. The very terms "body" and "crisis" exist on a wider plain of meaning, resonance, and relevance, about which this chapter is intended to hypothesize and even speculate. First, however, we must draw parallels between butoh and other frameworks, modalities, and disciplines as the belief structures and behavioral patterns in any pursuit determine its applicability within the social realm and the feasibility of its goals in any given historical moment.

## Other Bodies on the Edge

From here, we may begin to surmise how a butoh paradigm and its concomitant approach to disciplinary or quotidian goals may be approximated by theorization and practice in other contexts. One example outside of artmaking is how others have conceived of the performance of crisis in architecture. In the introduction to *Against Architecture* (1990), Denis Hollender's analytical and literary engagement with Georges Bataille's philosophy and writing, he argues against the positivist and utilitarian subtext that drove Bataille to write about the melancholic loss of social value and collective emotion accreted around the cathedral at Rheims that was severely damaged by the German army in World War Two. Hollender speaks of "the veiled ideological necessity controlling" Bataille's eulogistic text, "a far vaster and more secret cathedral in which it is thoroughly trapped and...which makes writing only possible *afterward* and against this text, against the oppressive architecture of constructive values" (1990: 15). Implicit within this thesis is the idea that there exists an inherent tension between dominant and subaltern value structures that compete for the use and meaning of architecture in general.

John McMorrough adds to this concept when he speaks of the "genre of the apocalyptic" in cultural thought, it being "the shadow of the progressive ideal of the avant-garde," "a description of a new prevalent condition," and "a means of working through the problematics of its era" (2009). The author asserts that the apocalyptic for contemporary society is "both global warming and sub-prime loans, both nuclear terrorism and social ills. All are real, and all are, to some extent, constructs" (2009). This "built" and "designed" nature of social structures, which are the manifestations of Hollender's competing value sets within social hierarchy, makes their destruction as much a beginning as an end: "In this sense the specter of the apocalypse is another version of the modernist tabula rasa, a leveling of the past to make way for the future"

(McMorrough 2009). For McMorrough, in this era of widespread fears about global collapse on all levels, competing ideals are put to the greatest test:

To shift from the utopian to the apocalyptic is not merely to set the terms in an opposing relation, but to understand their similarity. Both describe a condition of radical change; turning from one to the other as a privileged mode doesn't speak to a preponderance of nihilism per se but to a fundamental recalibration of the imagination. (2009)

Such a concept gives primacy to the potential for crisis to serve as a framework for how any form of design is planned and determined. Echoing Bogart's assertion that emergencies not only inspire but require creativity, Mark Wigley speaks of crisis as key to the very definition of architectural and environmental design:

Having acted as the clearest sign of an emergency, architecture is the final sign of recovery. But what happens to architecture when the situation goes beyond emergency? What happens when emergency turns into crisis as the familiar linear narrative—immediate danger and rapid response followed by careful repair and eventual recovery—does not unfold? What happens when the recovery narrative itself breaks down? What would be the architecture of crisis? Is crisis architecture a contradiction in terms or a crucial unacknowledged force? (2009)

This is something that "happens," a real life example of what in Turner's *social drama* model is a crisis stage that leads not to reintegration but schism or, borrowing Gregory Bateson's term for an ongoing lack of resolution, *schismogenesis* (Bateson 1972: 68; Turner 1985: 293; Schechner 2006: 211). Crisis is part of what Wigley refers to as society's "familiar linear narrative" in that we desire and, therefore, expect conflict to ultimately attain resolution. Crisis, however, may or may not result in resolution and does not operate according to the latter but rather factors and

influences related to *liminality*. *Stability*, the nominal opposite of liminality's in-betweenness, is often marked as confining and, therefore, static. For Wigley, an all-encompassing, paradigmatic approach to stabilization characterizes most emergency response mechanisms:

The role of emergency procedures is to maintain the limits of a particular space. In a sense, they define the real geometry of that space. The actual condition of a space is not revealed in its visible shape but in the emergency protocols that are used to maintain the shape. (2009)

Limited space and stability become co-defined in the context of emergency response, or what Wigley also calls crisis management. In this mindset, stability is equated with *stasis*. Hijikata railed against such a notion in postwar Japan. He posited his Tohoku imaginary's *nikutai* (*flesh*) body, refashioned from the *kokutai* (*national body*), as an alternative to the bland homogeneity arising from the combination of the Occupation's democracy by decree, an unleashed Western commercial culture, and an undercurrent of Japanese social conformity. Hijikata produced his idiosyncratically refined vocabulary of crisis body imagery by appropriating and juxtaposing archetypes of a hellishly stimulating urbanism and a mysteriously nurturing ruralism. His performative body, poised out of balance between these structures, sharply influenced by both yet defined by neither, stands in stark contrast to mainstream American domestic culture in the same postwar period. Corporeally, stylistically, and spatially, *butoh* practice sits opposite to the rise of American suburbanism in the 1950s and 1960s. As Lippard states:

Although for a century the U.S. has not been a rural nation, a single-family house with trees and flowers and a big lawn remains the American dream.... City living exists in vibrant defiance of that dream; suburban living compromises it. If the city has stood for vice, and nature for virtue, then the suburb is morally somewhere in between. (1998: 226)

Liminal in a vacant and noncommittal manner, suburbs are an ambivalent compromise between movement and stasis. They are redolent with the patina of an imagined upward socio-economic mobility, yet static in their occupants' desire for a secure position in the dominant socio-economic hierarchy. Conversely, engaging crisis provides motivation and rationale for processes, not between, but *leading* to either movement or stasis. Both processes are self-perpetuating: the nature of movement is stimulus and change, while stasis is distinguished by limitation and uniformity.

Physicist and environmental activist Vandana Shiva makes the case for the biological and social nature of movement: “Sustainable societies move in a stable state—with, not against, the cycles of life. To be in a stable state is not to be motionless; it involves movement and progression within an orbit, like an electron around the atom or the moon around the earth” (2005: 51). In other words, balance and harmony require motion and a perennial state of *coming-into-being*, a characteristic of *butoh* practice. Whereas Anne Bogart asserts “imbalance is more fruitful than stability” (2001: 130), *butoh equates* imbalance with stability.

Even after a half-century, there are few artists who claim the *butoh* mantle and also choreograph with heightened precision. Hijikata's *butoh-fu* was an attempted codification of his aesthetic, yet it was a method that instigated idiosyncratic active and reactive movement from within each dancer's imagination, so exact movements will always vary. The teachings of Ohno Kazuo, who functioned most of his life as a solo dancer, bred a further spontaneity in his students. His workshop exercises stress individual imagination and an extremely broad and indeterminate movement vocabulary based on simple, singular images.<sup>21</sup> As Goda Nario

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<sup>21</sup> For detailed description, see Ohno, Kazuo and Yoshito Ohno, “Workshop Words,” pp. 189-302 in *Kazuo Ohno's World: from without and within*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2004.

highlights, the approach developed by Hijikata, Ohno, and others established butoh as a paradoxically subjective and communal art: “A Butoh method developed, but the experience is individual. A basic attitude or approach is common in Butoh, both past and present, but expression varies. One attitude remains central to Butoh, however; the reaction of the body—it answers the world outside” (Horton Fraleigh 1999: 175).

Butoh’s openness and coming-into-being marks it as heavily impulsive, with movement, behavior, and action embodying exactly and only momentary form. Unlike crisis management, which attempts to circumscribe, contain, and erase crisis within proscribed parameters, spontaneity and improvisation in performance may be seen as crisis engagement, simultaneously embodying and representing the momentariness of being itself. As Wigley asserts, “Nobody can plan for crisis since crisis is exactly...that which defeats both planning beforehand and response afterwards” (2009). With systemic order redefined and, therefore, the efficacy of systemic resources reset as well, effective and meaningful crisis response must include that which expressly holds the potential for further crisis. Any logical attempt to resolve crisis is, sooner or later, further crisis.

Most butoh performers would consider this a good thing.

### **(Re)making**

So to where does the production and perpetuation of crisis lead? Was Turner correct in assuming that rituals of affliction possess a distinct ability to instigate communal compassion and sharing? Is Artaud’s theory that theatre can operate effectively in a plague-like manner, afflicting practitioners and audiences alike with a crisis state that triggers, in his words, our “hidden force” or “heroic attitude,” at all plausible? Is Wigley accurate in implying that crisis is the ultimate

paradox by which society moves forward and repeatedly generates itself? Do all of these theories possess a similar social agenda, and how thin is the line in crisis-based methodologies between benevolent transformation and fetishized manipulation?

To further comprehend the underlying nature of such questions and how butoh practice relates to larger frames of reference, I would like to compare and contrast butoh with a theory from the field of geopolitics; a broader, real-world phenomenon that has come to be known as *the shock doctrine*. Naomi Klein's book, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (2007), details the relentless and excruciating dismantling of social support systems worldwide where widely influential economist Milton Friedman's neo-laissez-faire concepts have been enforced via institutionalized, socio-economic chaos and violence:

In one of his most influential essays, Friedman articulated contemporary capitalism's core tactical nostrum, what I have come to understand as the shock doctrine. He observed that "only a crisis—actual or perceived—produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes politically inevitable." (2007: 7)

On the face of it, this theorem describes butoh as well. The crucial difference is that Friedman's followers have pre-determined, hegemonically-oriented concepts, structures, and solutions in place ready to implement when disaster strikes or, more ominously, is *made* to strike.

Conversely, butoh employs chaotic, contradictory, or otherwise irrational states to respond to for the sake of self-empowerment of individuals within a collective. As Maro Akaji describes:

In Japan, there is a great materialism and a great contradiction in people's attitude toward nature. If the unique economic situation in contemporary Japan is described as a miracle,

then Butoh is another Japanese miracle; it is the antithesis of the economic miracle and it is a total rejection of the values of that materialism. We need to stop the accelerated activity of development. We need to block the velocity. Butoh is therefore a dangerous force. (1987: 76)

As Wigley asserts, the designed emergency response of pre-determined solutions are intrinsically crises waiting to happen, which implies that the more structured, enclosed, and authoritarian the solution, the larger any resulting crisis may be and, therefore, the more possibility for a destructive result. While “Friedman predicted that the speed, suddenness, and scope of the economic shifts would provoke psychological reactions in the public that ‘facilitate the adjustment’” (Klein 2007: 8), his painful method of economic shock treatment aims to undergird hegemonic legal, commercial, and social structures en masse via masking and institutionalization instead of, as in butoh, highlighting and subverting their deleterious effects on individual bodies. While both systems imagine and generate landscapes full of cultural, ethnic, political, and economic difference, butoh stresses horizontal multiplicity where the shock doctrine looks to hierarchy:

Believers in the shock doctrine are convinced that only a great rupture—a flood, a war, a terrorist attack—can generate the kind of vast, clean canvases they crave. It is in these malleable moments, when we are psychologically unmoored and physically uprooted, that these artists of the real plunge in their hands and begin their work of remaking the world. (Klein 2007: 25)

With its emphasis on “presence” over expressivity, butoh might be said to also employ "artists of the real," but practitioners essentially *produce* by imagining new realities oriented towards the as yet unknown. As Katsura Kan states:

Butoh is something that you can't identify onstage. This is the basic concept. Obviously the human being is dancing, but it doesn't look human. It looks like earlier human, before human, or maybe it's a question about humanity. And then he seems to transform into an animal, stone, wind, nature, or whatever. And then for me the most important point is if something can't be identified. It's not a performer forcing his own image onto the audience. I think butoh is freer for performer and audience, who can transform together. (2010)

Conversely, the shock doctrinaires essentially reduce decreasing possibilities for action, diversity, and dialogue alternative to their destabilization by design. They diminish everything in their wake to corner the market for their own financial, psychological, or social profit. Klein's definitive example of the shock doctrine's true colors is the Chilean military's bloody overthrow of the Allende government in 1972 and the equally violent restructuring of the nation's economy:

Pinochet also facilitated the adjustment with his own shock treatments; these were performed in the region's many torture cells, inflicted on the writhing bodies of those deemed most likely to stand in the way of the capitalist transformation. Many in Latin America saw a direct connection between the economic shocks that impoverished millions and the epidemic of torture that punished hundreds of thousands of people who believed in a different kind of society. (2007: 8)

Butoh posits beginning with the body in crisis and extrapolating it out to the social realm once its recursive or healing properties have been primed. The shock doctrine works in the reverse, shocking society into determined chaos and submission, with a disabled, defeated, eviscerated, or, in the worst case, exterminated body in crisis as its logical result. As we have observed, Western Occupiers and subjectivity-obsessed avant-gardists—two groups of “artists of the real”

with contrary tactics and goals—competed to rebuild postwar Japan alternatively from the top down and the inside out. Klein points to post-coup Chile, post-Cold War Russia, post-invasion Iraq, and a host of other political-historical settings as similar battlegrounds.

Closer to home, corrupt government officials and greedy real estate developers looking to cash in on the destruction of poor and working class neighborhoods in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina took more than a page from Friedman’s book and gave the shock doctrine a toehold on American soil:

By the time Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, and the nexus of Republican politicians, think tanks and land developers started talking about “clean sheets” and exciting opportunities, it was clear that this was now the preferred method of advancing corporate goals: using moments of collective trauma to engage in radical social and economic engineering. (Klein 2007: 9)

The practical aftermath of Katrina was a heightened manifestation of the shock doctrine while globalization met global warming in crisis mode. The end result of such methods shows the shock doctrine radically altering social collectives in a top-down, authoritarian sweep, denuding the economic, political, and cultural landscape on its way to violating the mass of individuals. Butoh, on the other hand, begins with the lone, already crisis-embedded individual and radicalizes their state outward to the ostensibly splintered or oppressed collective as a disease-laden, vaccine-like, healing symptom. In other words, while an epidemic can make you rich, a bit of sickness can make you stronger.

In the context of Katrina, a butoh-like mindset, which inherently seeks out and considers idiosyncratic conditions produced by internal characteristics and external systemic oppression, would require consideration of local diversities within diverse localities, i.e. the opposite of the

shock doctrine's abstracting, homogenizing tendencies. C. Tabor Fisher discusses how these tendencies negatively marked such diversity within an insidious tautology in New Orleans in the decades leading up to Katrina:

Abstract space hides the relational nature of space. An abstract, representational space is produced when metonymic pseudo-subjects are symbolic representations that inhabit contained spaces, effacing their social and spatial relations. The Lower Ninth Ward has been repeatedly called poor, black, and crime-ridden, drawing on racist images of "ghetto" or "slum." Poor blacks become symbolic pseudo-subjects, spatially attached to the ward through a process Charles Mills has described as "circular indictment": if you live in the Lower Ninth, then you are poor and deprived, and if you are poor and deprived, you must live in the Lower Ninth. (2008: 161)

As Wigley illustrates, space delineates and often defines crisis, but crisis is responded to, managed, and resolved by people. Similarly, as butoh practice demonstrates, social and environmental circumstances may instigate crisis, but individuals subjectively engaged with crisis are what transforms it. Fisher links these concepts in discussing what he believes must be a consideration of multiplicity in order to address institutionalized racism and hegemony:

Spaces do not resist; only active people do. Therefore, in order to represent space in resistance to racism and classism, spatial theory must enable, rather than obliterate, the active subjectivity of the people who live in the Lower Ninth Ward, and it must include the relations among the people in the space and between those people and people in other spaces. Such a representation will be concrete, multiple, dynamic, and textured, and, therefore, less clean and comprehensive than abstract representations. (2008: 161-162)

Enclosing communal space marginalizes, ghettoizes, and defines it, thus eviscerating its power and influence. Opening such space—physically, mentally, and perceptually—makes its identity fluid, variable, and liminal, allowing for a broad spectrum of social relations, interdependencies, and cooperation, thereby increasing its value and effectiveness for its constituents. Butoh training frames the individual body as such a space, making the practitioner a representation and model for structured resistance and relational diversity.

Further, what is required for either enclosure or opening to be effective is a certain balance or imbalance between control and freedom. In the case of the shock doctrine, “For economic shock therapy to be applied without restraint...some sort of additional major collective trauma has always been required, one that either temporarily suspended democratic practices or blocked them entirely” (Klein 2007: 13). The shock and resultant crisis is externally rooted and imposed from outside, usually with predictably hierarchy-inducing results: “Like the terrorized prisoner who gives up the names of comrades and renounces his faith, shocked societies often give up things they would otherwise fiercely protect” (2007: 20). While butoh aims for reclamation and reinvention of identity and self, the shock doctrine results in their destruction and disappearance, where “followers deplore diversity and demand an absolute free hand to implement their perfect system.... It is a logic that leads ineluctably toward violence” (2007: 23).

Such a mindset—the crisis of stasis, the fear of movement and change—can be observed in every social arena. Thousands of police officers, with the coordinated assistance of the federal government, clearing out Occupy protests nationwide, corralling news cameras into “safe” areas, with batons blazing around every other street corner. Does Sean Combs ever leave a single synthesized instrument or auto-tuned vocal note to chance? Robert Wilson, perhaps the most successful and acclaimed contemporary theater director in the world, designs for a classical

perspective situated just at the center of every audience area; only a select few have the perfect—solipsistic—position for each staging. Even Yvonne Rainer, the doyenne of postmodern dance’s liberation of the quotidian body in high art, literally “certifies” those who are allowed to teach or perform her seminal work, *Trio A* (1966-present).

The shock doctrine and butoh are each an inverted conceptual turn of the other. Klein exemplifies the former through citing CIA torture manuals, much of which influenced Friedman’s principles and vice-versa:

They explain that the way to break “resistant sources” is to create violent ruptures between prisoners and their ability to make sense of the world around them. First, the senses are starved of any input (with hoods, earplugs, shackles, total isolation), then the body is bombarded with overwhelming stimulation (strobe lights, blaring music, beatings, electroshock)... It is in this state of shock that most prisoners give their interrogators whatever they want—information, confessions, a renunciation of former beliefs. (2007: 19)

Similarly structured but acting in a fundamentally different manner, butoh performance also often bombards the body with “overwhelming stimulation,” creating “violent ruptures” between “resistant sources” (practitioners and audiences) and “the sense of the world around them” that has been imposed from outside (socialized sensibilities and habits), thereby causing individuals to reveal personal “information, confessions” (their conflicted inner lives) through a liminal state. Thus, butoh and the shock doctrine are seemingly mirror images of each other, but in reality move in opposite directions with concomitant means and ends.

Klein also shows how imposing radical change too quickly or traumatically from outside can sometimes have the opposite of the intended effect of breaking the victim’s will. In recent

years in Indonesia, Bolivia, and Iraq, for example, authoritarian plans eventually backfired after the application of “too much direct pain and, instead of regression and compliance, the interrogators face confidence and defiance” (2007: 351). This may be one reason why and how butoh works, where the pain is inflicted from both outside *and* within, from not only dominant others but also oneself, making it not only shocking but intolerable and triggering a kind of systemic, psycho-physiological, cleansing reaction, what Goda refers to as “subconscious rebellion” within the “confused self” (Horton Fraleigh 1999: 175).

Sooner or later, the powers that be in any arena get wise, and the dance world is no exception. For butoh, an increased profile has also brought overtures to mass commodification, beginning with Hijikata himself starring as a Dr. Moreau-like villain in the 1968 horror movie, *Horrors of Malformed Men*.<sup>22</sup> Popular music acts, from Madonna to Tool, have employed painted, grotesque-faced, or “butoh-ish” bodies as signifiers of everything from misery to spiritual purity.<sup>23</sup> Even in the districts of high art criticism, butoh is still often reduced to an essentialized post-Hiroshima, Japanese psyche and inscrutable Asian bodies (Baird 2010). Perhaps this is no different than the commercialization of 1960s counterculture rock bands and 1970s hip-hop DJ and MC crews or refinement of the shock doctrine in the dawn of the 21st Century to commodify crisis itself:

Disasters and crises had been harnessed to push through radical privatization plans after the fact, but the institutions that had the power to both create and respond to cataclysmic events...had been some of the last bastions of public control. Now, with the core set to be devoured, the crisis-exploiting methods that had been honed over the past three decades

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<sup>22</sup> *Edogawa Rampo Zenshū: Kyoufu Kikei Ningen (Horrors of Malformed Men)*. 1968. Ishii Teruo, dir. Tokyo: Toei Studios.

<sup>23</sup> Madonna. 1998. “Nothing Really Matters”. Music video. Butoh artist Su-En (Susanna Akerlund) credited as “Butoh advisor”. Website accessed 4/18/2012. <http://come.to/suen.web>

would be used to leverage the privatization of the infrastructure of disaster creation and disaster response. Friedman's crisis theory was going postmodern. (Klein 2007: 364)

The logical end of the shock doctrine is revealed as predetermined crisis production, unlike butoh's indeterminate crisis revelation. It's the difference between Gandhi and Mengele, between putting your un- or de-appropriated body on the line and having it taken away from you beforehand. If, as I asserted in the previous chapter, butoh is capable of manifesting a *post-socialized* state of being, then the shock doctrine epitomizes a preemptive strike against such a possibility:

The next phase of the disaster capitalism complex is all too clear: with emergencies on the rise, government no longer able to foot the bill, and citizens stranded by their can't-do state, the parallel corporate state will rent back its disaster infrastructure to whoever can afford it, at whatever price the market will bear. For sale will be everything from helicopter rides off rooftops to drinking water to beds in shelters. (Klein 2007: 529)

This is augmented or artificial crisis designed to facilitate thievery at a magnitude of order greater than the imperial maneuvers of the postwar and postcolonial eras of the 20th Century. In the historical moment of postwar Japan's enforced "liberation" and re-engineering of quotidian corporealities, early butoh was a fetishized rebellion against a conveniently monolithic and impersonal hegemony and an apt reaction, though one that has perhaps become obsolete. While democratization by decree is still attempted (as in the recent and current Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts), it is proving far less efficient than consumption by arrangement. Why force people to live within a determined politico-economic system when you can instead persuade them that a limited set of pre-determined choices are all they need or desire?

In other words, we are facing a whole new kind of matrix and need to imagine resistance of another order. If my contention is correct that *butoh*'s revelation of self-knowledge leading to crisis may facilitate empowerment, then this may be a place to start. The architects of simulacra are intent on preventing awareness that there is ever any other world, life, or body with which to begin.<sup>24</sup> As Klein asserts, however, in detailing the ultimate experimental results of psychiatrist Ewen Cameron, the shock doctrine's methodological inspiration, *thievery* and *memory* make incompatible bedfellows:

All shock therapists are intent on the erasure of memory. Ewen Cameron was convinced that he needed to wipe out the minds of his patients before he could rebuild them.... But like Cameron's former patient Gail Kastner, with her intricate architecture of papers, books and lists, recollections can be rebuilt, new narratives can be created. Memory, both individual and collective, turns out to be the greatest shock absorber of all. (2007: 585-586)

In other words, knowing who you are entails not only who you have been but also who you can be. And if *butoh* is capable of maximizing memory beyond fear and initial shock, then in cultivating agency through one's moving body *as is*, memory becomes the handmaiden of imagination. This phenomenon is why *butoh* dance appears so inherently asymmetrical, off-kilter, decentered, and broken. *Butoh* performers are assembling themselves before our very eyes, and not back together, but into wholly new combinations of elements derived from the re-membered detritus of oppression, passion, marginalization, and desire. They are the answer and the question at one and the same time. As *butoh* dancer Denise Fujiwara states, "Memory and imagination

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<sup>24</sup> In his book, *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994), Jean Baudrillard conflates the "real" and its projection into the "hyperreal" of the *simulacrum*, which he contends then becomes the only reality, but he also admits between the lines that this is an intentional process. The evisceration of the landscape that the map replaces is, so to speak, a controlled burn.

have to play into my practice because they are the storage facility for our experience, and butoh is a retelling of our past. So if you have a good cache of memories, you become a richer dancer” (2012). Katsura Kan describes an even deeper resonance between what is held in the body and lost in society:

In the history of humanity, we always lose something very important. So that’s why I ask, how can we recover? Because when your grandmother or grandfather die, we lose many things. And we can’t catch up. But somehow we believe the body has memory. And then the dance only wants to involve some kind of memory. If we’re doing something we can’t identify onstage, it’s interesting because it might be my grandmother’s mother’s mother’s mother doing something like this [*demonstrates a movement*]. So that’s why new vocabulary in butoh helps to research something missing or vanishing. (2010)

As Klein states, memory operates both individually and collectively in its capacity as a “shock absorber,” which, in the context of performance, means that it is capable of fostering communal reference points between performer and audience. Every creative act spins a web of details within the dense realms of *history* and *memory*, and audience members experience the artist’s desire for meaning made from these elements. The more apparently compatible and harmonious these particles are, the more performer and audience are joined by the *weight* of history. As Pierre Nora states, “history is a representation of the past,” “binds itself strictly to temporal continuities, to progressions and to relations between things,” and “belongs to everyone and to no-one, whence its claim to universal authority” (1989: 8-9). The more seemingly disparate and contradictory a performance’s elements are, however, the more memory, both the performer’s and viewer’s in a shared state of desire, is tasked with making some sense of the pieces:

“Memory takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images, and objects” and “is blind to all

but the group it binds—which is to say, as Maurice Halberwachs has said, that there are as many memories as there are groups, that memory is by nature multiple and yet specific; collective, plural, and yet individual” (Nora 1989: 9).

Through its “broken-ness,” then, butoh performance charges memory’s affective capacity with the task of revealing and re-assembling—if not resolving—the shards of the body’s past that have been pulled apart by history’s authority...*including my own...*

***First Memory, First Body***  
***(Journal entry, November 2010)***

*This is the way it always begins.*

*I'm no different. A dream from among the first upright moments in life. Grasping the shaky railing of an unstable crib, simultaneously transfixed, fearing, and fascinated by the flood of ghetto bird moonlight tracing across my room from a sky too low for heaven above, but still over my head. I didn't understand, but someone was clearly in control. I distinctly remember wondering then and there if, when the light found me, I would become a suspect, a criminal.*

*Now, four decades on, guilt a foregone conclusion, I know very well how to find my light, but even better how to recede into the darkness, still on my own, still waiting, contemplating, among the shadows in every possible moment.*

*Flat-footed, I still maintain that first stance from 42 years ago as an achievement worth repeating, leaning precariously, one at a time, on the outside edge of my feet, an unsure stance entirely assured of its identity. The gravitational clarity of flat feet denied, deferring to a desperate, hopeless plea against Earth's pull out of respect, infatuation.*

*Forty-two years of stepping, one sole at a time scraping the concrete of a city too familiar and meandering. You see their virgin eyes upon arrival (No center! No there there!), but you know better, but you can't explain. You can only stand (nobody walks), smile, hope for the best, that they can learn to find theirs in the sea of super lowest common flat surfaces and countless identifications lurking beneath, sandtraps of empty form without a mirror.*

*In such a forest, no one follows your steps. They can't see a path you've no intention of marking, despite your occasional protestations. Infrequently, finding your dimmest possible light, you stomp out a clearing, a window to let back out your store of ghetto bird moonlight, a frame betwixt and between through which you invite infinite peering, a canted, cracked mirror held uncertainly askance; a mute plea for sympathy; a distant, firm, loving embrace.*

## **The (Never-)Ending**

In his book, *Rhythm Science* (2004), artist and writer Paul D. Miller (aka DJ Spooky, that subliminal kid) takes us on a ride through the variegated corners of a postmodern hip-hop philosophy. Taking “the mix” as his central metaphor, Miller weaves a literate and literal tale of hip-hop cultural practice as the very essence of early 21st Century being, where, through our cyclical consumption and expression of ever-increasing levels of reference-laden, cultural lexica, we are all fast becoming virtualized remixes in mind and body: “It’s an uncanny situation; the creative act becomes a dispersion of self. Back in the day, it was called alchemy, but in the hyperfluid environment of information culture, we simply call it the mix” (2004: 29). Instead of viewing this global phenomenon with trepidation or disgust as many critics have, and just as memory and imagination interweave in the mind-body space of the butoh practitioner or rescued victim of the shock doctrinaires, Miller views this historical moment as a golden opportunity for any and all members of contemporary society to make themselves over as they need or desire:

Sampling allows people to replay their own memories of the sounds and situations of their lives.... At the end of the day, it’s all about reprocessing the world around you, and this will happen no matter how hard entertainment conglomerates and an older generation of artists tries to control these processes. We’re in a delirium of saturation. We’re never going to remember anything exactly the way it happened. Memories become ever more fragmented and subjective. Do you want to have a bored delirium or a more exciting one? (2004: 28-29)

With this set of metaphors, we can likewise frame the butoh body as composed of contradictory samples drawn from the fields of our personal experience and socialization, causing a crisis that eventually resolves through a process of subjectivity, openness, liminality, loss of ego, and

transformation. Or as Miller puts it: “That’s what mixing is about: creating seamless interpolations between objects of thought to fabricate a zone of representation in which the interplay of the one and the many, the original and its double all come into question” (2004: 33). Moreover, like *butoh*, Miller sees contemporary hip-hop as possessing a distinctly therapeutic potential:

Could this be the way of healing? Taking elements of our own alienated consciousness and recombining them to create new languages from old (and in doing so to reflect the chaotic turbulent reality we all call home), just might be a way of seeking to reconcile the damage rapid technological advances have wrought on our collective consciousness. (2004: 72)

If, as Miller further contends, “Sampling is like sending a fax to yourself from the sonic debris of a possible future; the cultural permutations of tomorrow, heard today” (2004: 77), then *butoh*’s revelation of chaos may serve the same purpose for viewing the past. By showing the seams in the current constructed landscape—designed for the perception of seamlessness—within the space of one’s own body, one may comprehend the root fabric from which they come and reintegrate it through schismogenetic embodiment, or what Hijikata called sewing our “two skins“ back together again (Hoffman and Holborn 1987: 121). This is *butoh* as perennial remix therapy, where the ever-evolving, never-ending process of life and death and rebirth of self via the body in crisis is directly akin to hip-hop’s remix; where schismogenesis and resolution cohabit and become, not contradictory, but one and the same in a benevolently self-consuming cycle of reinvention.

Moreover, training and performance techniques designed to promote mind, body, energetic, and spiritual integration and resolve crisis states may also illuminate and inform other

broad discourses, such as health, politics, culture, and the environment. From the human body to the planetary body to the body politic, the desire and need for crisis resolution is perennially an urgent matter, for, as Wigley states:

A crisis is the moment that the threat is not just inside the space but is actually an extreme challenge to the space itself, from the scale of an individual psyche or body in crisis to that of a family, an institution, a city, a region, a nation, or a planet. If an emergency is a threat within a system, a crisis is a threat to the whole system. (2009)

Crisis is an existential threat capable of manifesting at all levels of scale, from the cellular to the bodily to the social. Butoh may serve as a microcosm—both a metaphorical figure and literal embodiment—of these parallel social structures and realms of being, though how this occurs will differ by each performer-practitioner or viewer-witness. Thus, in terms of my theoretical research, my ongoing, practice-based investigation focuses on 1.) developing a training method that enables practitioners to foster and maintain a corporeally resonant awareness of and ability to resolve personal, social, and/or environmental crises within their lives, and 2.) creating performance works that embody and/or portray these various forms of crisis and resolution and instigate self-reflection in audience members. (*See Chapter 6 for an example of current work.*)

### **An Empty Room**

In “Earth Democracy: Justice, Sustainability, and Peace” (2005), Vandana Shiva lays out a manifesto for shifting society and the planet towards an equitable, ecological, and harmonious balance, and her proposed modality for achieving this goal is the democratization of the source material of life itself:

We consider the evolutionary potential of all life on earth and re-embed human welfare in our home, our community, and the earth family. Ecological security is our most basic security; ecological identities are our most fundamental identity. We *are* the food we eat, the water we drink, the air we breathe. And reclaiming democratic control over our food and water and our ecological survival is the necessary project for our freedom. (2006: 5)

My long-term project is to contribute to a global discourse on crisis resolution by also theorizing democratization of the material of life, but with such material being the human body. Shiva aims for Earth Democracy to connect people “in circles of care, cooperation, and compassion instead of dividing them through competition and conflict, fear and hatred” (2005: 11). My goal is to elucidate a cyclical process of transformative affect made possible by butoh-based practice, positing active witnessing, liminality, vulnerability, and dialogue instead of their opposites—voyeurism, theft, separation, and authoritarianism. Conceived effectively, such a theory could be resistant and antidotal on at least the personal level against the effects of hegemony, overconsumption, and hubris. This set of principles may constitute a method of claiming agency over one’s own body, a commitment to decolonizing and deconsumerizing the self away from the compromises of bourgeois complacency that fundamentally centers on heightened awareness and presence of the existential results.

I frame butoh through a perennial duality of *movement* and *stasis* in a space activated by the balance of these inverse energies; a space that, as I said in the previous chapter, embraces the paradox of both embodying and negating dualities rooted in socialized and intuitive aspects of self. This bodily space would be marked as an idiosyncratic *place* by an individual’s practice, cycling through identity and potential, or what Zen literature refers to as *form and emptiness*: in other words, *an empty room*.

The integrated structure and process of this place is an ongoing tension between positive and negative energies of movement and stasis. As I outlined in the Introduction, the theoretical elements of butoh movement, echoing from the individual to society and back again, are *desire*, *trickster*, and *the commons*. The nature of stasis, conversely, is characterized by *desire*, *thievery*, and *enclosure*. All interwoven and interlocked, and all equally possible, these elements are addressed as a series of inseparable binaries in the remaining chapters.

### **Becoming Unstuck**

The idea that personal manifestation of a radical cultural identity and subjectivity can not only represent or symbolize social freedom and justice but also provide a practical template for communally realizing progressive ideals is nothing new. Indeed, great spiritual leaders throughout history are only the most obvious of perhaps thousands of examples. With this theory, however, the principles of butoh practice can form a philosophical lens of aesthetic dynamism and action that offers us a frame for knowledge production, meaning making, and crisis resolution within current urgencies and social spheres.

In *From Kung Fu to Hip-Hop: Globalization, Revolution, and Popular Culture* (2007), M.T. Kato traces such a process in the sphere of transnational production and consumption of Bruce Lee films from the 1960s to the present, where differing socio-economic values and priorities separated by race, class, and hegemony play out on a global stage. Kato characterizes the politically progressive element within this cluster of populations, communities, and industries according to David Solnit's "new radicalism," a worldwide, deterritorialized, multilateral, multisited, and multivocal web of thought and action. This movement is arrayed against "the planetary recolonization by transnational capital and radical undermining of national sovereignty

by supranational multilateral polity" (Kato 2007: 2). Kato cites the affective power of personal desire played out viscerally and subversively in social settings as possessing the ability to radicalize democracy in the face of neoliberal hegemony: "The undercurrent of subjectivity that runs from (Emma) Goldman to the global popular movement is a new paradigm where revolution pivots not so much on taking the power of the dominant institution as on reconstruction of society based on radical affirmation of desire and life force both on collective and individual levels" (2007: 2). Moreover, Kato echoes the potential for transposing butoh's recursive modality when speaking of the subsequent extrapolation of subjective expressivity in popular culture and on the mass level:

Thanks to the progressive aesthetic expressions generated in already semiautonomous subcultures, the popular culture gains its potential for producing affects, aesthetic values, and communal identities autonomously, right in the reproduction process of capitalist social relationship. Accordingly, the mass's appropriation of the progressive aesthetics of popular cultural revolution can render the commodity to "speak" for itself against the grain of its commodity identity. (2007: 3)

Butoh's ability to simultaneously decommodify and recommodify its expression is such a gesture, where "the constitution of progressive artistic expressions assumes a representative expression of the social movement of decolonization" (Kato 2007: 4). Hijikata mugging facetiously through a panoply of western social dances in *Nikutai no Hanran*. Kasai Akira deconstructing his modern dancer identity onstage through text and movement.<sup>25</sup> Tanaka Min

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<sup>25</sup> From the premiere performance of "Empty Boat," an ensemble work by Kasai Akira at the Aka-Renga Theatre, Yokohama, Japan, October 15, 2011, attended by the author and translated in part by Ishimoto Kae.

attempting to diminish his individual dancer persona.<sup>26</sup> Politically speaking, subverting the logic of predetermined form and refusing the audience's expectations of aesthetic familiarity or uncritical pleasure is not only an avant-gardist's *métier*, but also a benevolent socio-cultural gesture. Through excision of socialized barriers to cultural inclusion and recursive morphing of perceived and projected identity, butoh practitioners reconstitute the embodiment of culture through dialectically instigated and performed redefinition and display the results for viewers to witness and reflect on within the context of their own lives.

As I assert in the next chapter, *poetry* is key to actualizing desire's potential for manifesting this type of progressive state. Similarly, Kato cites Audre Lorde's claim that poetry is essential for overcoming late Modernism's overwhelming logos rooted in a Cartesian paradigm through a method, like butoh artists, of "mobile subjectivity":

When Lorde talks about "I feel, therefore, I can be free," the "I" that can free itself from any constraints through affect clearly departs from Descartes' "I" as a rationalized sense of being. It opens an alternative mode of flexible and mobile subjectivity which is singular yet collective, transcending the rigid boundaries of subject formation under the gaze of modernity. (2007: 5-6)

Likewise, Lewis Hyde cites psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion and French poet Arthur Rimbaud in asserting a similar existential fact in regards to truth and lies:

"The lie and its thinker are inseparable," Bion writes. "The thinker is of no consequence to the truth...In contrast, the lie gains existence by virtue of the epistemologically prior

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<sup>26</sup> "What I would like in the future is to be anonymous. Instead of saying 'my dance,' I am dreaming of becoming Mr. Nobody. I am trying to change the style of my activities so that it will be unnecessary to declare I am Min Tanaka, a dancer. If your point is about how original I am as a dancer, compared to such predecessors as Nijinsky, Martha Graham, Merce Cunningham, I don't care. As long as I can dance, even if what I do is not genuinely true dance, I am satisfied." (Tanaka 2006)

existence of the liar.” Lies require a liar, and as such they say something about the liar; they are thus better fitted than truths to the task of gratifying the self-regard or narcissism of the individual who makes them. Any work that simply replicates a truth known to others lacks narcissistic appeal.... When it comes to truth, however, as the poet Rimbaud wrote, “it is wrong to say: I think. One should say: I am thought.” (2010: 137-138)

Hyde’s discussion is part of a larger thesis in his book, *Common As Air: Revolution, Art, and Ownership* (2010), which analyzes the historical development in the West, especially in the United States, of intellectual property in opposition to the cultural commons and democracy. He shows that while democracy does not guarantee truth-telling, it necessarily makes it possible via multiplicity and dialogue. Moreover, his thesis implies the inverse truth that liars and thieves are always more vulnerable than honest truth-tellers because the former have something to hide. Coupling this concept with Hijikata’s and Lorde’s parallel assertions of subjectivity as an avenue to progressive thought and being, we may find an ongoing tension between the production of knowledge and truth via decentered, subjective embodiment on the one hand and untruth, obfuscation, and thievery via self-centered, objectivizing thought on the other. Objectivity requires logic, reason, and clear boundaries at the expense of all else. Subjectivity needs only poetry’s infinite resonance. It’s the difference between what is and what is possible.

This assertion resonates with the postcolonial urge for identity reformation where colonization means external control of the subjugated entity's identity, body, and resources and the reification of static modes of encounter (for an empire's subjects to remain underfoot, they must comprehend and believe in the reason why). Decolonization thus requires the externalization of internal processes of continuously renewed self-manifestation, or what Gayatri Spivak refers to as a process of both the “colonial subject detaching itself from the Native

Informant” and a “postcolonial subject...recoding the colonial subject and appropriating the Native Informant’s position” (1999: ix).

In the age of globalization, postindustrial borders, and corporatized, transnational commercial power reliant on mass cultural mythologies, Kato asserts that decolonization "necessitates reconstruction of vernacular imagery, narrative, and modes of reception, which can transcend the colonial imagery imposed upon the colonized" (2007: 8). We can see the same from Hijikata's 1960s revolt against Western dance, expressed through the cultural wasteland of his imagined postwar Tokyo, to his premodern Tohoku depicted in *Kamaitachi*, and performed in the 1970s and 1980s by his resident company, Ankoku Butoh-Ha. In Kato’s terms, Hijikata’s sickle-weasels, wind *daruma*, baby baskets in rice fields, and other bristling signs were his "vernacular imagery," his mythologized childhood was his "narrative," and the performative staging of both filtered through his semi-codified methods was his "mode of reception," all working to transcend his notion of a subjugating postwar colonization.

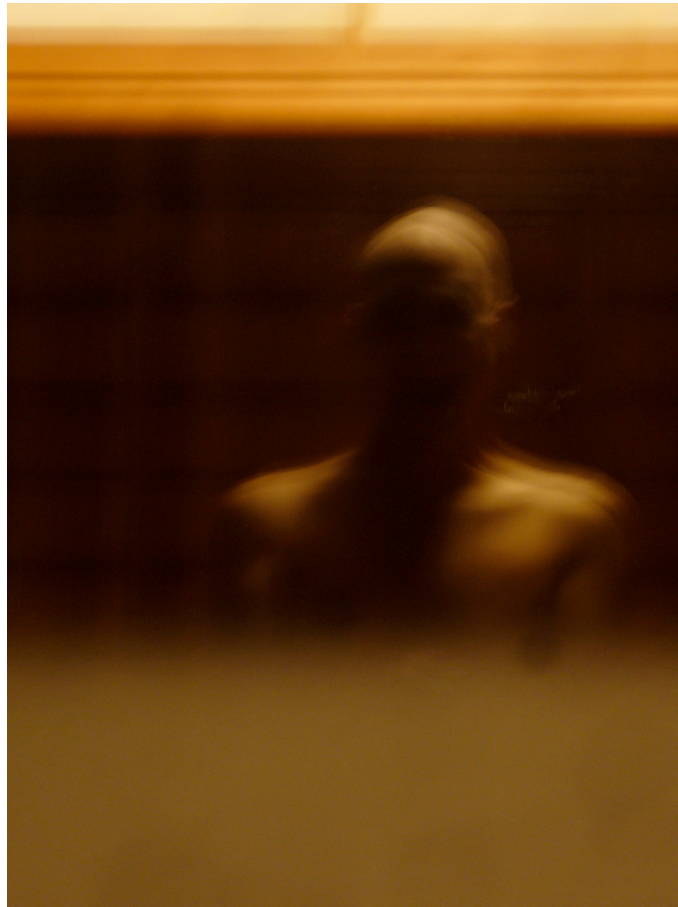
In this sense, butoh is the acculturated body standing—or rather moving—in the mirror, accepting the nature of what is, while instigating the nature of what can be, which eventually circles back around to further feed itself: a postmodern process not of unbridled atavism but fertility. And the element that underlies everything as a subtext in each moment of action and life is the same thing that can lead to passivity and death.

It is desire.

## CHAPTER 4

### DESIRE

#### In My Hands, an Empty Room



*Fig. 1. Self-portrait in dressing room, Kyoto, Japan, 2010.  
(Photo: Michael Sakamoto)*

*This is the chamber of desire. This is where it takes place, the manifestation of your dreams.*

*This is darkness, the space and time of your potential. Without light, you lack energy, impetus, movement forward. Without illumination, your potential diminishes, and you accumulate attachment.*

*Opening the shutter forms an iris, a circle. No beginning. No end. No hierarchy. No separation. Ubiquitous and perennial.*

*Letting in the light is a decisive act. But will it mean non-intervention or engagement?<sup>27</sup> Are you creating images, embodiments, or both?*

*Who are you?*

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<sup>27</sup> Sontag stated, “Photographing is essentially an act of non-intervention” (1977: 11), but she was speaking of photography as a solipsistic and socially passive act; the *acquisition* of images, as opposed to the *production* of knowledge and awareness.

## The Reflex Image: I am (not) that



Fig. 2. Cyclo driver, Saigon, 2005. (Photo: Michael Sakamoto)

*My life has moved me in many directions. I am taken along its path, and it has driven me to laughter, tears, joy, despair, and utter longing for what is both possible and impossible. This yearning also drives me onward, into a realm of perspective, viewing, framing. Throughout my life, every moment of such longing has brought me to the brink of the mystery of my own life. This is the reason I photograph.*

*My first camera, a Christmas present when I was six, was a Kodak 110 Instamatic. I used it for every special occasion throughout my childhood, attempting to document, to prove that something happened to me or that this or that person was my friend. Along with my portable cassette tape recorder, I ran around the playground for years trying to capture funny or crazy moments with other kids that reflected their idiosyncrasies, the grain of not only their voices but their bodies and faces.*

*In 1981, when I turned 14, I took a high school photography class and everything changed. Not because I was in class, but because my uncle, knowing I needed better equipment to do the work, gifted me with his 1969 Canon Pellix SLR, a 35mm single lens reflex camera. Suddenly, I saw a reflection, a shadow, of what I—or anyone and everyone, for that matter—could see later in print. I could exactly frame. I could exactly focus. I could sharpen or blur whatever I deemed more or less important to my image. I could reduce the mystery and fulfill my desired aesthetic goals. Or so I thought.*

*With each homework assignment, I madly dashed out into all corners of the city to which I could gain access, trying to seize what little my post-adolescent mind understood of Cartier-Bresson's "decisive moment."<sup>28</sup> I soon discovered, however, that the photos that stuck in my mind were also the most indistinct. A gnarled tree engulfed in morning mist overhanging an infinite ocean. Magic Johnson swooping through the air like a vapor trail. Raucous students stumbling over themselves at a pep rally. These were not the images that I was sent to capture, nor photos that the school newspaper or yearbook editors were interested in highlighting, but they released my imagination. I slowly realized that such images—liminal moments that simultaneously expressed the familiar and unfamiliar, the known and the unknown—were the stuff of real life.*

*In the 28 years since I first stepped into that classroom, I've never stopped photographing, and I still use an SLR. I still get as close as I can to my subjects, frame them as exactly I can, and focus as clearly and quickly as I can on what I feel in that moment are their most engaging qualities. I also know it's all in vain.*



*Spirit medium, Chiang Mai, Thailand, 2010 (Photo: Michael Sakamoto)*

*Never finding what I'm looking for is the nature of the beast, and it's exactly what I'm drawn to. Reflective photos. The photo-image as mirror. Dialogic photos.*

*In reflex photography, the shutter-mirror reflects the light from outside, from "other," onto and into the eye, causing the faintest glimmer of the eye's image to reflect back onto the shutter-*

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<sup>28</sup> Cartier-Bresson, Henri. 1952. *The Decisive Moment*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

*mirror and then to the outside. Thus, the light-image from outside creates the light-image from inside. Outside becomes inside. No separation.*

*And in the instant of opening the shutter to register the image, altering halides, pixels, and brain cells, the mirror flips up, escapes the light, and holds itself suspended, facing my eye in pure blindness—utter darkness, ankoku—and leaving me to stare at my own invisible reflection.<sup>29</sup> Direct witnessing of the very image in time and space with which I choose to fulfill my desire is inherently denied by the very technology that seemingly produces the out-of-time manifestation of such desire.*

*On the surface, desire and acceptance may seem antithetical, yet their results are complementary. Desire motivates action, while acceptance instigates transformation. In the camera eye, passive and active combine to create a paradox within the cumulative movements of life itself.*

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<sup>29</sup> Lacan's "mirror stage," the moment of a baby's realization of psycho-physiological identity, his first conceptual "I" (Lacan 2006), becomes inverted in the moment of the SLR camera's capture: the photographer is left in the dark with the shutter-mirror and his own unreferenced reflection.

## Dancing in the Dark

In his analysis of Freud's *desire* (*Begehren*) drive, Jacques Lacan situates desire in the indeterminate space between *demand* for satisfaction and love and the unconditional *fulfillment* of the subject's perceived need for the object of that love, i.e. the *Other*:

For the unconditionality of demand, desire substitutes the "absolute" condition: this condition in fact dissolves the element in the proof of love that rebels against the satisfaction of need. This is why desire is neither the appetite for satisfaction nor the demand for love, but the difference that results from the subtraction of the first from the second, the very phenomenon of their splitting (*Spaltung*). (2004: 276)

Desire is thereby liminal, becoming the producer and product of its own continual cycle of demand and dissatisfaction. It exists because it wants more than what is necessarily possible, throwing its resolution, and any of its corollaries, including crisis, into a perpetual state of satisfying and not satisfying, of becoming and not becoming. This cycle, producing the perceived need to fulfill or negate our desires—what Georges Bataille called desire's "excessive violence" (1962: 142)—catalyzes our imagination to create mental landscapes that act as templates for perception, knowledge, and behavior.

Reflecting on Lacan's spatiality, Slavoj Žižek speaks of the human impetus to somehow connect "the incompatible domains of desire and *jouissance*," even if only indirectly through a third party (1997). This other element he identifies as Lacan's *object a*, which is "not what we desire, what we are after, but rather that which sets our desire in motion, the formal frame that confers consistency on our desire," and that possesses "a set of fantasmatic features which, when encountered in a positive object, insures that we will come to desire this object" (1997).

This “formal frame” for butoh dancers is the self that one is not, or rather the other always already within each person, which we want to control and which also regulates us. It is the structure of how we relate to ourselves and thereby determines the quality of our desire. As Kristeva asks about the self in its initial mode of abjection after realizing the ultimate irresolution of desire, “Is desire ever anything else but desire for an idealized norm, the norm of the Other?” (1982: 47)

The Other is the dark spirit of butoh: the dance of desire between the “face-soul” of *omote-ura*, and the internal “mirror” of *kage*: the constant and inescapable reflection of mask and inner self conjoined. The butoh dancer is the dualistic entity integrating subject and object, both signifier and signified of the irreducible doubleness of cohabitation. Moreover, as demonstrated in the preceding chapters, this entity operates and is expressed on three levels. One is the relation between performer and audience, negotiating the damaged/decommodified code of the practitioner with the recoding/recommodifying gaze of the witness. Another is socialized behavior, ranging from innocuous peer pressure intimacies to imperialist decrees, a force-fed frenzy of repetitive utilitarianism and homogenization. Finally, the butoh performer is her- or himself, peering consciously and abjectly into the mirror in recursive spite and acceptance of the juxtaposition of all three aspects. In other words, butoh’s masked self—its face—contains the *communal, domesticated, and intuitive*.

Roland Barthes’s recollection of the distinct personalities of the three gardens surrounding his childhood home also evokes these aspects. He expresses the way in which need and want occur and recur in the reflexive mind: “The worldly, the domestic, the wild: is this not the very tripartition of social desire?” (1977: 6) These three qualities are practically identical to butoh’s three faces, implying the practitioner’s desire as a social tripartite as well. Yet another

three-fold public practice asserted by Barthes is photography: “I observed that a photograph can be the object of three practices (or of three emotions, or of three intentions): to do, to undergo, to look” (1981: 9). Butoh and photography are not only aesthetically fraternal but akin in behavior as well. Each medium in its own way is the epitome of desire and action.

Most language for photographic engagement is violent and authoritarian: *hunt, aim, point, shoot, take, capture, freeze, have*. Politically speaking, these are ultimately acts of ownership, hierarchy, and authority (Sontag 1978). There is, however, another tradition, built not on the accretion of power but within the presence of life itself, where a balance is sought between desire, perception, and reality. *Opening the shutter. Letting in the light. Witnessing. Exposing* a sensor or film (a sheath, a membrane) within a camera (a dark chamber) to the outside world. An electronic sensor or strip of celluloid filled with millions of light-sensitive particles is a fragile medium indeed. Beyond Sontag’s insights, the act of photographing is inherently vulnerable.

Allowing a crisis state to envelop one’s mind-body presence, as is done in butoh-based training, also makes one inherently vulnerable. Because such training involves constant use of embodied imagery, practitioners make themselves emotionally and psychologically exposed to their imagination within the act of moving and performing. When we consider this fact within the context of butoh’s “desire drive” as described above and its embrace of contradiction as described previously, a deeper implication of the tension between body and image becomes apparent. When image-based desire (attachment to one’s constructed vision of the world) is counteracted or balanced by action (what is), then, like the camera, the body becomes as in the koan that introduces this study, *an empty room*, with nothing available on which to hold or depend.

Examining the interaction of desire, body, and image reveals questions of identity and perception as well. Butoh photos, for example, aren't as innocuous as any old snapshots. These are images of practitioners attempting to *be* liminal and perform crisis itself. A large part of the impact of such images—the multiplicity of their *punctum*—is derived from the perception of “edginess” in the performers, from their cultivated impression of darkness, abjection, or a tenuous grasp on life. Yet perception, not to put too fine a point on it, is just that. Unlike the body, it is *not* the thing itself. Perception lives in the middle distance between subject and object, between self and other. Intertwined with Lacan's *object a*, it brings with it a possibly contradictory experience within the very nature of photographic encounter, namely the simultaneous push and pull of desire. We feel removed from the subject due to chronology and the myriad factors contributing to otherness, yet photos may also stimulate deep-rooted feelings, thereby making us feel more ourselves as well. As Lippard describes: “Photographs are seen both as ‘facts’ and as ghosts or shadows. They are the imperfect means by which we fill the voids of memory in modern culture, to preserve the remnants of a world that has disappeared. Often we don't even know who the people in the photographs are, or where they were taken” (1998: 56).

Like butoh photos, images of violence and death portray a tenuous grasp on life and, indeed, may be considered by many to be the epitome of the latter and a taut challenge to the perception of anonymity to which Lippard alludes. They also challenge our desire for knowledge and meaning and trace the limits of our fascination with viewing the Other. In *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), Sontag addresses such challenges through an examination of how photos of trauma, atrocity, and war are represented, perceived, and used. She cites the example of a 1936 photo by David (“Chim”) Seymour that shows Spanish villagers involved in land reform. A

public sympathetic to the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War, however, appropriated the photo as a supposed depiction of innocent civilians in fear of air raids. As Sontag puts it: “Memory has altered the image, according to memory’s needs, conferring emblematic status on Chim’s picture not for what it is described as showing (an outdoor political meeting, which took place four months before the war started) but for what was soon to happen in Spain that would have such enormous resonance” (2003: 30).

Memory and imagination often conflate in this manner due to familiar markers that evoke common feelings. Desire, especially what is labeled “collective desire,” may cause this mental leap, acting as a magnetic force that binds together disparate images and qualities in what is concomitantly referred to as the “collective unconsciousness.” Sontag reveals that this force is not a singular entity, but an accumulation:

All memory is individual, unreproducible—it dies with each person. What is called collective memory is not a remembering but a stipulating: that *this* is important, and this is the story about how it happened, with the pictures that lock the story in our minds. Ideologies create substantiating archives of images, representative images, which encapsulate common ideas of significance and trigger predictable thoughts, feelings. (2003: 86)

Individuals in a collective are affected by this function of mass “stipulating” of supposed facts and implied narratives, which may lead to extreme generalizations. Embedded in the floating signification of Seymour’s photo, for example, is the danger of depersonalization. The mother and baby no longer represent themselves but rather all victims of war that targets civilians.

The force of such images instigates the power of the viewer’s desire in determining expressive behavior, how we construct memory and create knowledge capable of fulfilling such

desire. If Berger was right that meaning arises in photographic perception when we assign a past and future to a photo, then are not history itself and *narrative*—the concomitant language of history—constructed by our desires in a similar fashion? This is the fundamental reality underlying the oft-repeated truism that “history” is written by the victors. Many of the stories we tell and the truths we “know” are driven by what we want from life. Pierre Nora refers to the nature of this condition in speaking of memory, which he states is both collective and individual and therefore behaves according to all that it desires in any given situation: “Memory, insofar as it is affective and magical, only accommodates those facts that suit it; it nourishes recollections that may be out of focus or telescopic, global or detached, particular or symbolic—responsive to each avenue of conveyance or phenomenal screen, to every censorship or projection” (1989: 8).

Anne Bogart describes the same phenomenon at work in the magic of theatre, where “reality is a construct of thought that desires community. Actually, the expectation of continuity is a glorious fiction” (2001). She speaks of memory’s inherently corporeal nature: “The act of memory is a physical act and lies at the heart of the art of theatre. If the theatre were a verb, it would be ‘to remember’” (2001). For Bogart, to refashion the self is also to remake the world: “We create truths by describing, or re-describing, our beliefs and observations. Our task, and the task of every artist and scientist, is to re-describe our inherited assumptions and invented fictions in order to create new paradigms for the future” (2001).

With Bogart’s thesis and the workings of *desire* in mind, we may reflect back on how many butoh practitioners relate their performative identity, rooted in the sum of their self-identity, to their perception of Hijikata, Ohno, or other artists they admire or with whom they have studied. In short, each artist may construct a certain persona with which they choose to identify according to their remembered selves from throughout their lives. Consequently, when

practitioners dance, focused as they are on a self-imposed ordeal of chaos and contradiction, they invent a crisis narrative: love and hate, joy and sadness, life and death: stories that live between desire and possession; that portray what simply is.

## “Girl”

*I'm looking at a photo taken by Onozuka Makoto of Hijikata performing in 1972. The dance is called, “Girl,” and Hijikata is suspending himself barely off the ground by both hands and one foot while his other foot is awkwardly twisted in the air. He wears shoes so worn into decrepitude that I expect them to fall off at any moment. A mishmash of contorted costume elements wraps around his waste and genital area, like a makeshift diaper made of old clothing scraps. His long scraggly hair is tied awkwardly with a shiny, radiating hairpiece hanging down behind his back. His body is covered in sloppy patches of white makeup and plaster, and his bloodshot eyes stare upward, across the space into the distance.*

*I say I'm looking at this photo, but it feels like I'm witnessing a totally personal, historical moment.*

*When I see this photo, I want to stand up. When I see this photo, I want to move. When I see this photo, I want to cry, but the tears never come, just as I am unable to move, unable to stand.*

*When I see this photo, my breath immediately slows past faltering, becoming small, infinitesimal, as if the air in my lungs is all I have left, and I must breathe as gradually as the blooming of a flower.*

*When I see this photo, I see a body forsaken, in shambles, and I want to gather the pieces within myself, unbreak them, dance my way into a complete body in spite of its destitution and destruction.*

*When I see this photo, I want to become the thing itself.*

## Seeing Is Believing Is Seeing

When I see the photo of Ohno in the poster on my wall, I see liminality. I sense that more is always possible. This image of deathliness moving despite itself provokes my subjective desire to live beyond my assumed means. It makes me want to become something beyond a clearly defined identity. I want to embody the utter potentiality that I perceive the photo.

In me, Ohno's photo acts as both a metonymic and mnemonic device. It is metonymic because for me it stands for more than just Ohno himself. My love for the photo and feeling of wholeness gained when viewing or recalling it make it an emotionally-charged sign of "butoh-ness" that I viscerally experience in the moment. It is mnemonic because the photo aids in my memory of butoh-ness. While I have accumulated this memory over two decades of witnessing and participation in butoh in the United States, Europe, and Asia, it is a remembrance devised in part by the experience of such photos—what and how I wanted to experience based on the images in my mind.

Based upon its own past as well as mine, Ohno's photo is "the living image of a dead thing" (Barthes 1981: 79). As instigation and recollection of memory and emotion, the image acts as cause and effect of its own *punctum*. In interaction with my desire, it produces its own *raison d'être* as an ongoing arousal, provocation, and muse-like image for my practice. Derrida alludes to this process in citing Rousseau's thesis on God's originary nature "speaking" for itself:

To speak before knowing how to speak, not to be able either to be silent or to speak, this limit of origin is indeed that of a pure presence, present enough to be living, to be felt in pure pleasure [*jouissance*], but pure enough to have remained unblemished by the work of difference, inarticulate enough for self-delight [*jouissance de soi*] not to be corrupted by interval, discontinuity, alterity. (1998: 249)

The “voice” of a photo—that which speaks from within oneself as *punctum*—is the voice of one’s own God. But unlike “God,” this voice is not only palpable but knowable: “The pleasure [*jouissance*] of a continuous and inarticulate presence is a *nearly* impossible experience.... The heart is not an organ because it is not inscribed with a system of differences and articulations. It is not an organ because it is the organ of pure presence” (Derrida 1998: 249-250). The “heart”—a word spoken by Derrida as both spiritual (energetic and theistic) metaphor and the psycho-physiological center of human being—is not in the strictest sense a means because it is always already an end in itself. Derrida’s term for the voice of God scaled down to human measure—what speaks through the heart—is *neume*, “pure vocalization, form of an inarticulate song without speech, whose name means breath” (1998: 249). Chief among its significations is “the pleasure [*jouissance*] of self-presence, pure auto-affection, uncorrupted by any outside” (1998: 250), or, in other words, *subjectivity*.

Despite the deep subjectivity of my relationship to butoh images, I believe my experience is common among transnational butoh dancers of my generation who came of age first as students and then as artists in the 1980s and 1990s, after butoh artists and teachers from Japan had established themselves abroad, mostly in cities across North America and Europe. We were hungry, with only a few books and the occasional visiting performer from Japan to whet our appetite for more. Two English-language photobooks, Jean Viala and Nourit Masson-Sekine’s *Butoh: Shades of Darkness* (1988) and Mark Holborn and Ethan Hoffman’s *Butoh: Dance of the Dark Soul* (1987), were highly instrumental in circulating butoh photo-imagery in America, while Susan Blakeley Klein’s *Ankoku Butoh: Premodern and Postmodern Influences on the Dance of Utter Darkness* (1988) was the first scholarly treatment of butoh to be published in English and also included a few photos.

American butoh dancer Alenka Bravo studied in the 1990s with Tamano Hiroko and Tamano Koichi in San Francisco and Yoshioka Yumiko and Seki Minako in Berlin, and has since produced her own work. She remembers her initial practice as being partly an engagement with butoh photo-imagery as well as *butoh-fu* designed for use in workshop by her teachers. In terms of image-based motivation for meaning in her practice, she mentions photography specifically, and speaks of the *Kamaitachi* images as a template for exploring the roots of one's dance:

I think those images most definitely take us back to that place where he's from. They've definitely influenced me to go back and investigate our roots and where we come from personally. I grew up in a very rural environment in West Texas. I was born in Lubbock, and we moved every three years all over these industrial wastelands. My grandparents lived on a farm, and I stayed with them quite often, so my memories of childhood are these rural wastelands where it's nothing but big skies and one tree with my swing hanging down from it. So that's the kind of landscape that I came from. I grew up very lonely in a way because it was only me and my tree.... Those kinds of experiences and images have personally inspired me in my dance and in my investigations of what is normal, who we are and why we are here on this planet and how we are going to keep it spinning in a peaceful loving way. So I think those (*Kamaitachi*) images are powerful in that they wake us up to these kinds of ideas. (2011)

Mizu Desierto, an American dancer who has lived most of her life in the western United States and trained as a student of the Tamanos and then Diego Piñon in Mexico, echoes these thoughts: "Of course, *Shades of Darkness*, the others. Everybody knows those books. Those were some of

the first photos I saw. I think the most compelling butoh photography that I've seen is by Eikoh Hosoe.... I don't feel well-versed on butoh photography other than the classic books" (2011).

Desierto's relationship with butoh photo-imagery, while not an overt aspect of her artistic practice, nonetheless continues to affect her concept of the dancing body and the values she places around it, 16 years after her first experience with butoh: "I've got a beautiful book of images of Min Tanaka. It's exquisite. I love the images because they really speak to another part of me that's interested in just simplifying and getting more away from costumes and abstractions and into just the human and the land. And I just love that's he's so stripped down and bare" (2011).

Sensitivity to the continuum of nature and humanity's responsibility toward it is cultivated by the nexus of Desierto's photographically inspired perception of how butoh practice can inform an understanding of the earthly terrain with her declared values as a progressive citizen. These fuel her desire for developing a method of manifesting those values in everyday life. As a mature artist whose broader concerns are focused on developing a sustainable relationship between contemporary society and the environment, Desierto is transforming her practice away from one that is primarily stage-based into a corporeal engagement with organic farming and permaculture, a subject on which she co-taught a course in 2011 at Portland State University.

Japanese-American dancer-choreographer Shinichi Koga also began his dance career as a student of the Tamanos but no longer refers to himself as a butoh practitioner. He collaborates with a full range of modern and postmodern dance artists, including, for example, Axis Dance Company, ODC Dance Company, and dance pioneer Anna Halprin. He has also worked with respected butoh artists such as Murobushi Ko and Kaseki Yuko, in addition to the work of his

own interdisciplinary dance theater ensemble, InkBoat. While referring to himself as a contemporary dance and physical theater artist, Koga admits that many of his early inspirations were similar to other butoh artists: “I would say that images of Yoko Ashikawa were very inspiring for me. I think there was something about her visage that, subconsciously or consciously, I would lock onto. It’s hard for me to trace, but I would say those were strong in my imagination” (2011).

Desire’s relationship with imagery, however, is a double-edged sword, perhaps in artmaking a necessary risk between perception and projection. In the case of neglecting the assumptions, values, and other influences underlying one’s comprehension of what one sees, Barthes’s senses of *punctum* and *studium* may too easily conflate into an objectified and, eventually, ossified image. Koga feels that he’s witnessed this dilemma in the butoh community:

The photographs that have really embedded themselves for the most part have been these extreme moments. So if you have a diagram showing the ups and downs of things, there’s this peak moment there that is the extreme, and the photos represent something of that in the dance itself. And it’s of course these extreme moments that can become very exciting, and it’s natural that they would become *the* photographs. But then to say that these extreme moments *define* the dance, or the perception of the dance, of what the dance is, is a little problematic, I think.

And you used the word *essentialized*. So what we start to get is there’s maybe 3,000 images of butoh dance, for example. Well, you can’t track all 3,000, so you start whittling it down, and you’ve got maybe five images that have become the consciousness of what butoh dance is. And so many people will say,

“Butoh dance, yeah. Shaved, bald-headed men, painted white, hanging upside down,” and they’re going right to Sankai Juku. And it’s like, boom, that’s *it*. So they have this idea of butoh that becomes this easy thing to not discuss or to just be able to go, “Check!”, that’s what it is. (2011)

Koga has now moved beyond conscious thought of butoh photos in relation to his work:

Butoh dance has a lot of images. And these images are well-known, and I think a lot of people refer to them either in their idea of what butoh dance is as an audience member or as a practitioner. And I’m not necessarily down with all those images. And that’s an attitude that has grown over time. Because at the onset of being exposed to butoh dance...I was really hot for it. I was like, “Oh, wow!” I wanted to see all the pictures and read all the books. It was just wild and inspiring for me. And I don’t want to denigrate any of those photographs, but it’s just not where I’m at right now. (2011)

After an established career as a modern and postmodern dancer, Denise Fujiwara was choreographed by Nakajima Natsu in 1994. She continues to work with primarily Western-trained dancers and looks for ways to employ a butoh philosophy to contemporary Western choreography. This approach makes her wary of being fascinated with early butoh photos, which she feels may impede her progress as an artist:

All those photos have become iconic. They seem to describe what butoh is to so many people. So I kind of avoid them because that was the butoh then and there, and they’re so powerful, and I’m trying to do butoh here and now. I’m not suspicious of them, but I’m so conscious of them as icons that I know that’s what I should not do. I should not be seduced by them. (2012)

Conversely, Onozuka Makoto, who has photographed many butoh artists since the late 1960s, readily admits that his own practice, “looking in” to the dancers “from outside,” overtly embraces this fraught relationship between performer, photographer, and, viewer. When asked what his objective is in creating photos of butoh artists, he replies, “Life and death. That’s it. Imagination or fantasy, eros, or other things. Projecting my imagination into the performance” (Onozuka 2011).

Butoh dancer Katsura Kan believes that all practitioners must eventually decide for themselves what will aid in their artistic development:

Everybody can say what butoh is. It’s a rocky mountain. Whether a very small mountain or higher mountain, it depends on you. If someone says butoh is finished, it’s that *their* butoh is finished. Your mountain is finished, because you cannot go up, or you don’t need to. You can go another way. But if someone wants to seek something higher, it needs more steps. So for me, it depends. (2010)

### **Seen and Unseen, Bought and Sold**

The ongoing tension around butoh photo-imagery points to a deeper issue: the manifestation of desire in the butoh practitioner being the fragile line between active and passive behavior, between perception and projection. It is the difference between embodied crisis and its representation via standardized form. Desire is also the danger of mythologizing to the point of stasis versus an open process of imagination leading to transformation of a practitioner’s or viewer’s mindset, frame of reference on reality, or social paradigm with a concomitant value structure. In other words, if a mythology is a codified, typed, or patterned cosmology, then personal myths, the stories that we invent and tell ourselves about our world but that necessarily

draw from larger communal belief systems, are always already rife with the potential for either revealing or reifying dominant discourses and ideologies; for opening or closing one's eyes.

Butoh performance's ability to engage this perceptual binary is what often makes it so simultaneously attractive, unattractive, and mystifying to many viewers. For Tamano Hiroko, this is a natural consequence of the nature of theater-going combined with any type of performance that questions why the audience is there to begin with:

The theater is the place to see yourself. That's why people go to the theater. For traditional dancing, people go to the temple or wherever the dance is happening to see their spirit or god or something coming out, or the story of the gods and goddesses. And that's really in their bodies. It's the same thing. It's a mirror. So when you go to the theater, you're sitting inside of the darkness, your darkness, and then the eyes open, and the performer comes through, and you see yourself. And some people stand up, kick the chair, and go home. Sometimes people stay. What's the difference? What's happening when some people kick the chair and go away? (2010)

Katsura Kan also argues for cultivating the mystery within performance as an inherently benevolent gesture toward the audience:

If something cannot be identified onstage...it means there's potential. Dance is a kind of dream, and it's very difficult to catch the moment, and if we don't name it, it's gone over time. However, I want to encourage something surreal, like Dali's clock. It's concrete. We can see this clock, but it's melting. So twisting reality. It never happens again in reality, but this surrealism is touching something deeper inside, for the audience, not just the dancer. So the important point is the audience is starting to talk about their own kind

of dream, to describe it. If the viewer has a really good interpretation, he finds his forgotten secret that he didn't realize he used to have. (2009)

The emphasis in butoh practice on manifestation of one's subjective "truth" through this surreal mode resonates with Sontag's assertion that effective expression of the human experience requires simply fidelity to an unfamiliar but incontrovertible reality: "The Surrealists misunderstood what was most brutally moving, irrational, unassimilable, mysterious—time itself. What renders a photograph surreal is its irrefutable pathos as a message from time past" (1978: 54). Surreal encounter requires a tenuous balance between the known and the unexpected, such as in live performance that somehow questions the viewer. While the theater may be, as Tamano asserts, where one goes to see oneself, what "self" the audience expects or desires varies according to each viewer's values, belief system, or emotional strength. Whereas some viewers resist looking into the "mirror" in this way, Tamano sees the butoh artist's responsibility to provide a reflection that is unpredictable—and, therefore, suddenly and uncomprehendingly meaningful—for the audience:

Maybe whatever you do (as a performer) can be a mirror or not. If the mirror is fuzzy or cracked or not clear enough, that's not worth seeing maybe. So you really have to polish it yourself. It's a solid glass. If you put so many ornaments, too much, and you are hiding, then somehow you really should polish it more. That's necessary. Otherwise, who's gonna see a dull dancer? We really have to polish this up. Then there's no limit. Every morning run. There should be no hesitation to practice more. (2010)

When viewing photos, however, viewers retain greater control over their experience. The stillness of photos enables viewers to position themselves at a distance, allowing the privilege of a restrained perspective if so desired. Susie Linfield compares this inherent quality of viewing

photos—which creates “a space the viewer can use: to separate herself from, and if necessary resist, the image and its maker”—with time-based imagery, especially that of suffering and violence. She gives the example of the execution video of kidnapped journalist Daniel Pearl: “The fact that such propaganda consists of moving images rather than stills is one key to its pernicious power“ (2010: 164).<sup>30</sup>

Live performance, which is not only time-based, but also in-person and in-real-time, takes this breakdown of resistance in one’s viewing consciousness—and therefore also, as Tamano might say, the artist’s responsibility to consider that fact—a step further. For an audience member, the decision to engage or not with the performer in the symbiotic act of mutual mirroring is the difference between becoming a *witness* or *voyeur*. The choice is between creating an understanding for oneself or receiving undecoded messages as they are.

While a witness is considered to be someone capable of testifying to the truth and who possesses experiential evidence or personal knowledge of something, art that engenders witnessing is nonetheless that which withholds obvious clues to such truth or avenues to such possession. Whether visual, spatial, or time-based, documentary or fictional, creative expressions of intense conditions and situations do not often provide easy rationale for the existence of such extremes. These objects implicitly ask viewers to reflect on their sense of responsibility to not only the objects’ historical veracity but also their truthfulness on many levels, thereby instilling in the viewer an impulse to comprehend through a deeper and broader lens. As Linfield asserts in

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<sup>30</sup> Lawrence Douglas argues that video, such as the secret footage of the “spectacle of vengeance” of the chaotic execution of Saddam Hussein, retains a visceral immediacy capable of even eliciting sympathy for patently immoral individuals:

It achieved the unimaginable: it made a mass murderer appear more dignified than his executioners.... Whatever fairness, good faith, and judicial sobriety were evinced...has been entirely eclipsed by the execution itself. In our global culture, the battle between word and image is no battle at all. Three hundred pages of legal argument cannot answer two minutes of grainy cell-phone video. (2007)

discussing photographer Li Zhensheng's brutal images of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, "They propel the viewer searching for the 'why' into history, political theory, memoir, and fiction; they exemplify the ways in which photographs are irreplaceable documents of history, yet cannot be understood on their own" (2010: 102).<sup>31</sup>

Similarly, 1960s Japanese visual and performing artists—such as Moriyama Daido shooting blurry, indeterminate photos of socially marginal figures, Terayama Shuji creating surreal, ethnocentric stage images, or Hosoe and Hijikata taking fantastic, mythologizing portraits—denied passive viewing, asking audiences instead to actively engage their own referential knowledge and lyrical vision. Such works posit an opportunity for viewers to become empowered witnesses via a holistic orientation.

Alternatively, viewers may choose to be voyeurs, distant observers seeking for no larger frame of reference than the proverbial keyhole to confirm or satisfy their desire. According to Kristeva, voyeurism is inherently and dangerously elicited by the confluence of abjection and object: "Voyeurism is a structural necessity in the constitution of object relation, showing up every time the object shifts toward the abject; it becomes true perversion only if there is a failure to symbolize the subject/object instability. Voyeurism accompanies the writing of abjection. When that writing stops, voyeurism becomes a perversion" (1982: 46). Such perversion, Kristeva argues, may lead directly to narcissism, of which abjection is both precondition and coexistent, even to the extent of prefiguring Lacan's mirror stage (1982: 13).

Butoh artists who fetishize chaos and crisis run the risk of eliciting voyeurism to the point of distortion or parody of their expressivity, implying that abject desire as an end in itself is a

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<sup>31</sup> Li was a young photojournalist when the Cultural Revolution began and was granted access to document many of the most visceral and oftentimes violent events of the first few months. He later lost his position and was sent to a labor re-education camp. Many of Li's photos from the period are collected in the book, *Red-Color News Soldier* (2003).

path to narcissism and destruction. Butoh performance aimed at crisis resolution or a state of cohabitation, however, is a performance of crisis that imagines abjection beyond narcissism and asks the viewer to become a witness. Butoh performance may advocate and impel a liminal viewing context and thereby possibly foster critical involvement, or it can reify its embodiments and images, distance the viewer's critical faculty, and indulge pre-existing desires and expectations. The former choice inspires active looking, thereby producing knowledge and potential, while the latter allows for passive observation, accepting what is already assumed or left unknown. Witnesses look at what is and therefore what is possible. Voyeurs accept what is stated and therefore reify myth.

As Barthes established, myth is a semiological system and a type of speech beyond ordinary language, its messages delineating exact parameters around subjects (1972). In the case of *Kamaitachi*, the photos are the meaning signifier of the signified Tohoku imaginary and butoh body. For viewers seeking a more absolutist concept of Hijikata's life and work (and leaving aside for the moment those who remain open to what the photos might mean for any individual viewer), their consumption of the images within the context of Hijikata's signifying imagination moves the pictures beyond mere form into myth, or, as Barthes defined it, "speech *stolen and restored*" (1972: 125). Further, "Myth hides nothing and flaunts nothing: it distorts: myth is neither a lie nor a confession: it is an inflexion.... We reach here the very principle of myth: it transforms history into nature.... it is not read as a motive, but as a reason" (1972: 129). Despite *Kamaitachi* being flamboyant, declamatory, and ostensibly autobiographical, Hijikata is able to slip the trap of truly personal revelation and create instead a template for practitioners' further imagination and, thereby, generation of desire.

In terms of Hijikata's work with his dancers in the 1970s, such gestures took shape within the mythologically-based, operative confines of his *butoh-fu* system. While exact bodily forms were not dictated by *butoh-fu*, it is arguable that the words and images employed yet constituted a specific cosmology that determined the interpretive parameters of Hijikata's choreography. As Hijikata's lead dancer and protégé Ashikawa Yoko has written: "Hijikata's dancers, regardless of whether they were brought up in the city or suburbia, without any direct observation, unconsciously began to move like children from the north country, from Tohoku" (Hoffman and Holborn 1987: 18).

Nakajima Natsu, the first female dancer involved from the initial development of *butoh-fu* in the mid-1960s through the Ankoku Butoh-Ha era in the 1970s, adds, however, that Hijikata came to an impasse with his systematization. She states that he worked for years to codify his practice but ultimately fell short of his goal:

Codified dance, like kabuki or traditional dance, it takes time. Time created this code.... For example, in Nihon Buyo, even Noh theater, they learn the code, so they will be very skillful, but not all of those who learn the technique are real dancers. Only genius dancers can get over the code. This is art. This is their dance. So freedom is important, and Hijikata knew it. Also, living in only his own generation, he can't say this is the code. After 100 years, then the code can appear. For example, Hijikata loved Maro Akaji very much as a student, but he hated his dance. He said, this is not dance, this is not butoh, but also, he had to admit it (as valid). Each true story (like this), he had a very big struggle about it because he devoted half his life to create this system, so he wanted to be able to say, "This is butoh." But he had to deny this because dance is free. (2011)

Butoh dancer Murobushi Ko, who trained with Hijikata in the late 1960s and was an original member of Maro Akaji's Dairakudakan troupe before creating his own work from the mid-1970s to the present, makes a similar assessment:

It's Hijikata's contradiction, I think. Butoh doesn't need this tradition. It's most exciting when a new dancer comes, and he can start with just his motivation. Maybe it's bad.

Maybe many newcomers are bad. But there's 100 creations, and maybe in one, revolution comes. Maybe that's enough. We must accept this. I don't think Hijikata was a liar, but I think he wanted to make his own style into Ashikawa Yoko. But this way of creation, I think in the final moments of Hijikata's life, Hijikata said, I made a mistake. To make it so clear. Too much on one special dancer, and too stylized. (2011)

In 1998, 12 years after Hijikata's death, butoh artist and former Hijikata disciple Waguri Yukio published "Butoh-Kaden," an interactive multimedia CD-ROM (now re-released as a DVD-ROM) detailing his experience and understanding of *butoh-fu* from his work with Hijikata in the 1970s and 1980s. Though the project's goal was to preserve and extend the knowledge gained from those years, Waguri still expresses the danger of working too rigidly within this system: "What I'm most afraid of is that dancers including myself become slaves of words. If the body were eaten up by words and we danced to explain the words, dance would be dull" (Tanigawa and Waguri 1998).

In *butoh-fu*, while dancers' movements are not rigidly codified, words are still charged with the essential meaning that he intended, thus setting his subversive poetics in conflict with his desire for expressivity through a clear mythology. In speaking of the political implications of poetics and mythology, Barthes contends that the two systems proffer differing goals: "Poetry occupies a position which is the reverse of that of myth: myth is a semiological system which has

the pretension of transcending itself into a factual system; poetry is a semiological system which has the pretension of contracting into an essential system” (1972: 134). Vladimir Marchenkov extends Barthes’s idea as well as Derrida’s contentions around the inherent metaphoricity of all philosophical stances, by arguing that myth and poetry—or, in broader terms, philosophy and art—exist in a symbiotic, circular relationship: “The generation of identity and difference in mythical symbols, aesthetic metaphors, and philosophical concepts is the source of an intricate reality arising from its own interaction with play, of a constantly evolving myth that sustains and, in turn, is sustained by the openly ‘unreal’ story of art” (2007: 179).

Hijikata’s stated rebellion against the confines of a Western corporeal aesthetic thus may have resulted in an ambivalent tension in his own work between myth and poetics, producing both conflict and cooperation between systems of meaning and meaning-making. Barthes’s assertions on the nature of such gestures point to the root of this double-bind: “It is because it generates speech which is *fully*, that is to say initially and finally, political, and not, like myth, speech which is initially political and finally natural, that Revolution excludes myth” (1972: 146). In other words, there’s a difference between actual revolution and revolutionary mythology, à la wartime rhetoric, standard American history, or, in Hijikata’s case, a return to Japanese nativism. While the revolution in *Nikutai no Hanran* may have been a sloughing off of Western hegemony, Hijikata also established and perpetuated his own mythology in its place, thereby perhaps embedding a poison pill into the ultimate efficacy of his art as a political gesture. By naturalizing his own version of Japanese politics within the semiological system of his Tohoku imaginary, Hijikata established a practice with its own inherent set of limitations ridden by an identity crisis. One might ask, how can you challenge power by taking it at the same

time? Or, to turn a cliché to a subversive bent, in a situation where one becomes the thing itself to be overcome, how can you have your cake and vomit it too?

Despite Hijikata's own eventual retreat from codification, a tendency continues among many dancers towards mythologization of one's own practice. We can never escape who we are and where and when we come from, but the extent to which we delve into particularities or generalizations—and in the case of butoh, corporeal idiosyncrasies versus cultural universals—is a choice that each artist makes. For those who worked directly with Hijikata or began their butoh practice during his heyday in the 1970s, there was probably scant evidence that much of a choice was available. Dance critic Sakurai Keisuke cites the work of two butoh groups that came up in that period, Sankai Juku and Byakko-Sha, noting that Hijikata's employment of a culturalist frame around his dance continued into the second generation of butoh artists, even when they attempted to replace his Tohoku body with another:

They, with the mastered body of Ankoku-Butoh, Japanese and, moreover, rustic, by transferring it in some form, shift the original, the Japanese body to an Asian body. They thought it was possible to replace the Japanese body with the Asian body. The fact is you cannot avoid the gap between the young generation and old folk customs of North Eastern Japan. Young people cannot identify with them. Therefore, when they interpret mastery, they look in the direction of Asia. In the past, I guess there were such bodies everywhere but, not today, so they tried to gain ground by reconsidering the time issue spatially. (1998)

We might say that this approach is an attempt to make the body iconic beyond Hijikata's own generalities, and it reaches its ultimate manifestation on the level of spectacle, an expressive form inordinately defined by static desires predominant in society. As Barthes states, for

example, about the spectacular world of wrestling: “The public is completely uninterested in knowing whether the contest is rigged or not, and rightly so; it abandons itself to the primary virtue of the spectacle, which is to abolish all motives and all consequences: what matters is not what it thinks but what it sees” (1972: 15).

On a more fundamental level than the conventional “willing suspension of disbelief” innate to most theatre, the spectacle-oriented public desires the myth-laden image and experience of the fulfillment of their desires, not the truth, thus sacrificing internal to external, content to form. Further, just as the spectacle of suffering is the object of the fight in wrestling, so it often becomes in butoh spectatorship. In this context, the liminality of butoh enters, in a way defined by Turner, the realm of *liminoid*, i.e. liminality once removed and codified through the devices of theater rather than the devotional purposes of ritual (Turner 1982). When butoh (or any) artists are marketed, packaged, and sold to an audience, presenters trying to maximize attendance typically sell a static impression of what to expect. Most audience members who come to a show have an idea that the experience of the work, while unpredictable, still somehow conforms to the accepted norms of the venue.

Katsura Kan, who spends most of each year touring worldwide as a choreographer and performer as well as teacher and researcher, sees this as an inevitable and unavoidable dilemma in the arts world, with butoh as no exception to the rule:

American postmodern dance, Trisha Brown and other pioneers, now what are they doing?.... They’re using postmodern dance technique and doing more entertainment and commercial art. So it’s impossible for more than 10 or 20 years to keep the avant-garde.... For example, Sankai Juku, they have to survive. More than 20 years ago, when I was in Avignon, the Avignon director said it’s not Japanese butoh; it’s French butoh.

“We created it,” he said. It’s a kind of orientalism. And then Sankai Juku’s director, Amagatsu Ushio, he agreed, because he has to survive. And I don’t say this is bad, because Japanese contemporary arts became business in the Western world. That’s great. Never happened before. So it’s okay. Commercial is commercial. (2010)

We might refer to butoh performance engaged in both liminal and liminoid states as what Schechner has labeled a dialectic process of “efficacious versus entertainment” (2006). It is the adaptation of entertainment forms to create ritualized performances. In some cases, perhaps, crossing into a wholly liminoid state would require an artist to forego their own inherently liminal process, which may happen often with butoh artists and students, especially those who employ modish forms, full of gestural, facial, and imagistic stereotypes. Even Kan, who has spent years examining such issues, admits that even he occasionally falls prey to high art convention: “Even for me, I made the Tibetan Book of the Dead at Naropa University, using a huge black box, a lot of visual images, and music and sound, lighting, and it became beautiful. And I thought, ‘Ah, this is too beautiful.’ So I need more crisis onstage. So maybe this was not butoh, but more of a kind of normal ‘performing arts’ work.” (2009)

When successful, staging butoh may reveal or cause tensions within the viewer’s continuum of feeling, affecting coherence between normative modes of audience perception and a liminal expressivity. Audiences new to butoh are often unsure of how to see or watch performances, which, when emphasizing irrationality, grotesquerie, or improvisation, may challenge expectations around narrative logic or choreographic intent.

Further, when this liminality takes on a national identity (e.g. Hijikata’s pre-modern “Japanese” body) and is presented internationally (butoh since the late 1970s), it engages issues of commodification of racial, ethnic, and political identities across borders. The latter tend to be

utilized in society as fixed entities and exist in tension with a liminal self created to trouble such definitions. Each side, however, contains both fixed and indeterminate aspects. Hijikata's "Japanese" body was designed to be in a constant state of chaos and crisis but within ethnic boundaries. Conversely yet just as reductively, many Western viewers tend to reduce butoh bodies to fit within an exoticized perception of Japanese-ness (*nihonjinron*), but also within the notion of a rebellious, avant-garde, artistic lineage existing against archetypal Japanese cultural norms. As Miryam Sas articulates:

At its most reductive, and easiest to sell, the rhetoric of the Japanese body simply falls into the closures and clarities that make it very difficult to distinguish from orientalizing *nihonjinron*—or, to put it another way, it reinforces that already deep tread. In its binarizing mirror, these performances as presented for export come to be categorized and fixed in these limiting gestures or frames. (2011: 175)

The more successful butoh artists in terms of audience numbers and touring tend to be companies with spectacular aesthetics. Dairakudakan has toured internationally for decades, and many Europe-based groups (e.g. Ariadone, MAMU Dance Theater, Ten Pen Chii Art Labor) are active nationally in France and Germany as well as internationally. Sankai Juku is the supreme example, however, having steadily toured large-scale, mainstage works worldwide for three decades, with most of their pieces commissioned regularly by the prestigious Theatre de la Ville in Paris. Moreover, their aesthetic erases any sense of crisis or absurdity. In every new work, the dancers are presented as highly-stylized, objectified bodies, perfectly costumed, made-up, and choreographed within a series of fantastic, immaculate stage sets. Amagatsu Ushio, the company's founder, director, and lead dancer for 35 years, has stated, "Producing unerasable

impressions is our business” (Trucco 1984). Nothing is left to chance in their scintillatingly crafted universe.

Many butoh artists and critics consider Sankai Juku’s work to be an abandonment of butoh’s visceral energies, an erasure of ambiguity, doubt, anxiety, fear, or the qualities that infuse any address of the relationship of one’s mind-body to the dominant social order. Instead, Amagatsu, who has defended his choice to create “my own butoh,” has developed an abstract, minimalist aesthetic that is both very impressive and readily digestible for audiences that highly value that which is harmonious, pristine, universalist, and also, therefore, apolitical. Sankai Juku’s painstakingly refined and hermetically confined style reinforces and champions bourgeois cultural values. As Japanese dance critic Isshi Tatsuro observes, however, Amagatsu is entirely conscious of such rationale, which has also resulted in greater notoriety for butoh in general:

What Amagatsu is looking for is different. He’s not looking for danger or the body in crisis. Whether you like it or not, he looks for a perfection onstage, which completes itself with the performance. Sometimes it works beautifully, and sometimes it’s just repetitious. But I think Amagatsu is among the few most influential in butoh, even though Hijikata did not approve of Sankai Juku at all. (2011)

Or as Amagatsu has stated, in contrast to butoh artists’ predominant focus on crisis resolution that yet includes crisis, a form of perennial coming-into-being, “Butoh dancers’ bodies are like a cup filled to overflowing, one which cannot take one more drop of liquid—the body enters a state of perfect balance” (Holborn and Hoffman 1987: 121) Amagatsu’s abstract statements in lieu of program notes ostensibly advocate for a vision greater than the individual self, but they reside in a Platonic realm of ideal forms, mystical beauty, and pure image that would be perfectly at home in a late 19th Century Parisian salon. For example, notes from the 1999 work,

“Hiyomeki,” include: “The speed of consciousness and the distance / of movement, / The speed of the body. All carefully treated. / When one arrives at imagining infinity / the body moves nearly at the speed of light, / and nears an almost unlimited stillness” (Samuels 1999). The show, “Yuragi” (1993), includes section titles such as: “Donmiri—Wind Resembling Air,” “Brimming Ripples,” and “The Outer Reaches of Tranquility” (Garafola 1997).

Amagatsu’s words ultimately buttress the group’s orientalized performances with a conservative narcissism. It’s no wonder that some prescient critics, even in the mid-1990s before many reviewers and audiences realized that Sankai Juku were repeating themselves, noticed a marked lack of tension in the company’s work. For example, Lynn Garafola, in a 1997 *Dance Magazine* review of “Yuragi,” states:

Sankai Juku's new work, *Yuragi: In a Space of Perpetual Motion*, is shimmering and luminous, a vision of sensuous delight that makes it hard to recall the shock of the group's first performances in this country some ten years ago.... Now, only the chalk-white bodies and time-arresting evolutions are left of that expressionist world. *Yuragi*...invites us to contemplate a paradise of marvels, each more exquisite than the last. (Garafola 1997)

By the 2000s, the group’s formulaic approach to impenetrability was becoming obvious to even those critics new to their work and to butoh, such as Catherine Hale in reviewing “Kagemi” for *ballet.com* in 2003:

The very frisson of *Kagemi* is its inscrutability. We Westerners love confronting the inadequacy of our rationalism, and Amagatu capitalizes on that, giving us also polished performances and exquisite stagecraft to hold our attention when our metaphysical

appreciation wanes. In fact, *Kagemi* is, more than anything, a gorgeous visual spectacle.  
(2003)

Unlike Ohno Kazuo, in whom the contrast—and therefore stimulating tension—between the ideal dancer image and physical reality is both extreme and plainly evident, Sankai Juku's aesthetic is dedicated to utterly dissolving this divide, leading to expression and reflection of its own rarified concepts. As Sakurai inquires about the group:

Are not the simple body after removing the details or the abstract expression after reducing, hakkoichiu ("one home under the heaven," a slogan used as the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere of Japanese militarism)? They removed the outer layer since they thought it was only an outer layer, then to the contrary, the body underneath became the outer layer, so then the reality and materiality of the body no longer possessed a strong meaning. In other words, such "Asian bodies" are only symbols that do not exist anywhere, but there are details in each Asian dance when we look at them. They might have forgotten the fact that details support dances. Even if we do not go so far as to say it is "hakkoichiu," it may only be "Asia as an illusion," which does not exist. (1998)<sup>32</sup>

In simpler terms, dance critic Goda Nario views Sankai Juku as an aesthetic dead-end: "For myself, I don't like Sankai Juku. They give too much; there is no room for the audience to play" (Horton Fraleigh 1999: 175-176). To borrow Barthes's analysis of bland and dispassionate

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<sup>32</sup> Despite Hijikata and Amagatsu's differences in form and concept, they may lie along the same continuum of, after Edward Said, a "reverse Orientalism" that started with Hijikata's essentialized, anti-Western, "Japanese" body and manifested transnationally with Sankai Juku's essentialized, Europeanized, "Asian" body. Ueno Chizuko speaks of such maneuvers as having followed in the footsteps of "European Orientalists who imposed particularity and uniqueness on the Orient in the first place" (2005: 235). She asserts that "reverse Orientalists accepted Europeans' ethnocentric logic, reversed their discourse, and created a counter-discourse following the same logic" in which "nationalist discourses lie within the Orientalist perspective and are no more than by-products of Orientalism, despite their self-conscious particularism" (2005: 235).

American porn, in which he asserts the “stereotyped (worn-out) image” virtually prevents any genuine pleasure:

Such a reversal necessarily raises the ethical question: not that the image is immoral, irreligious, or diabolic...but because, when generalized, it completely de-realizes the human world of conflicts and desires, under cover of illustrating it. What characterizes the so-called advanced societies is that they today consume images and no longer, like those of the past, beliefs. (1981: 118-119)

This phenomenon is perhaps best summarized through Barthes’s delineation of spectacle’s fundamental mental orientation:

This grandiloquence is nothing but the popular and age-old image of the perfect intelligibility of reality.... It is the euphoria of men raised for a while above the constitutive ambiguity of everyday situations and placed before the panoramic view of a univocal Nature, in which signs at last correspond to causes, without obstacle, without evasion, without contradiction. (1972: 25)

Similar to Barthes's distinction, Gaston Bachelard recalls his own reflections on the relationship between imagination and spectacle:

I also spoke of a spectacle complex in which pride of seeing is the core of the consciousness of a being in contemplation. But the problem under consideration in this present work is that of a more relaxed participation in images of immensity, a more intimate relationship between small and large. I should like to liquidate, as it were, the spectacle complex, which could harden certain values of poetic contemplation. (1994: 190)

Bachelard is sensitive to the fetishization of seeing, of holding onto a firm poetic imprint that outlines its borders and encloses itself too clearly. Sankai Juku's stage pictures are immense, and Amagatsu's mystical obsessions are ineffable, yet the company repeatedly employs an expressive style of brilliant clarity. Precisely choreographed bodies free of ambiguity or ambivalence display the trappings of unfathomability, yet are so harmonically and statically composed and shot through with intention that they minimize, or "harden" in Bachelard's terms, the resonance of what else might lie within their spirit. In such a space, Tamano Hiroko's question of personal identity is left aside. In the very constructedness of their aesthetic, Sankai Juku *already* know exactly who they are before even asking.

Such a state represents spectacle as the perfect distillation of an *impression* of reality and the opposite of embodied crisis, disjuncture, circuitousness, or indefiniteness. Is butoh spectacle therefore a contradiction? Can an artist simultaneously aim for a crisis state and general public satisfaction? Just like wrestling audiences don't care if the match is rigged, perhaps many mainstream butoh viewers don't care if there is any real crisis occurring in the performance. The possibility brings us back around to this chapter's central theme of desire and begs the question: *Are audiences actually desiring butoh?*

I believe this is a paradox that has subconsciously haunted butoh practice since Hijikata's time. It is the simultaneous challenge to be inspired by a revolutionary or revelatory mythology and to move beyond it according to one's own desires and devices. As I asserted in the last chapter, life never stops moving, and one is always working through the mythologies operating in one's life, either in concert, against, or in a reflexive, back-and-forth tension with them, for ultimately, myths are parasitic, simultaneously alive and dead: "Myth...is a language which does not want to die: it wrests from the meanings which give its sustenance an insidious, degraded

survival, it provokes in them an artificial reprieve in which it settles comfortably, it turns them into speaking corpses” (Barthes 1972: 133).

To not resolve this tension may lead to a loss of criticality, the perpetuation of static modes of encounter and perception, and, thus, the reification of false stability. The act of displaying one’s social marginalization while inscribing oneself with the tropes of an alternative center of power, or, as in Hijikata’s case, exercising power over those who do, is a behavioral contradiction. It is a further tension between that which is generative and reductive:

The oppressed *makes* the world, he has only an active, transitive (political) language; the oppressor conserves it, his language is plenary, intransitive, gestural, theatrical: it is Myth. The language of the former aims at transforming, of the latter at eternalizing.  
(Barthes 1972: 149)

Did Hijikata perpetuate dominance on a personal level by substituting his Tohoku mythology for that of Western hegemony? If so, is overcoming this bind a central challenge for butoh to move forward as a viable progressive practice? How might butoh avoid stasis and instigate itself as a process of poetic reflection, being, and, finally, expression?

This is, of course, anything but an easy task. Unpacking the static effects embedded in the roots of an artistic practice even as ostensibly resistant as butoh may itself be a cause for seemingly irreconcilable crisis. Moreover, no one desires to betray their roots, least of all within a lineage of “master-student” relations born from a fairly rigid, tradition-minded society like Japan. Even in America, far removed from specific, concrete forms of Japanese essentializations or hierarchies, butoh artists are hard pressed to discover what exactly might set them apart beyond nationalistic or ethnic identity, especially since the practice is fundamentally an inquiry

into one's various identities and experiences of identification. Mizu Desierto exemplifies the complex nature of this cultural dynamic:

In some ways, this is the most compelling question for me...What is American butoh? How is it different? When I go to Japan, I'm often told, "Your expression, everything about you is too loud. It's too much." And I think this is really Western because we're so expressive. So my question is do I try and imitate Japanese and reduce and refine to that kind of nothingness, or is butoh for an American more about I am *more* what I am?... I *am* expressive, I *am* emotional, I am all these things that are very different from Japanese culture.... I should dance my culture. I should dance my own preoccupations with stress or anxiety or the too much or the too loud. It's part of it. That is American butoh. (2011)

Moreover, Desierto draws from the butoh movement's long preoccupation with root identity through a cultural lens:

Through butoh, I have become interested in my cultural inheritance. I did a piece in 2009 about my ancestors that came from Italy and the Americanization that happened from my grandmother's into my father's generation. And then me, this person walking around without really knowing her identity or a strong sense of family or roots is the condition of so many Americans. Wanting to find how that path happened and how to integrate the part of me that longs for it. What they tried to create here but was eventually usurped by American culture.... I think butoh asks the question, where do we come from? (2011)

While Desierto also acknowledges the danger of exoticizing *Eastern-ness* in the minds of Western dance students and audiences, she sees this cultural dialectic in relatively benevolent and optimistic terms. Shinichi Koga, however, views it more warily. He is cautious of the effect of injecting an art form largely defined on both sides of the Pacific as "Japanese" and that is

often labeled as “foreign” or “exotic” into a massive American society comprised almost entirely of immigrant families that always already has its own ambivalences around identity:

Americans, I feel, are especially thirsty or hungry for cultural connections.... People acknowledged to a certain degree their cultural heritage, and they have some ear to it, but it’s distanced. We’ve become distinctly American, but what is American food? What is American culture? These things exist, but they’re a bit nebulous. They haven’t been with us a long time, and there are so many families with so many different traditions. So there’s this sense of a traditionless nation that has come from so many strong traditions, and yet, there we are. And so when something comes in with a strong cultural identity, I think there’s a strong interest. It’s very attractive. (2011)

Speaking specifically of the situation where Japanese *butoh* artists like the *Tamanos* move to America and take on American-born students, Koga feels that the latter must find their own way and guard against exotifying *butoh* and trying to acquire some perceived Japanese essence:

I think a lot of Americans say, “Wow,” this exotic thing, and you feel like you’re participating in another culture’s strong identity. I think for Americans that has narrowed the idea of *butoh* dance. All these trappings of what it is for Japanese *butoh* dancers is like trying on a suit that doesn’t quite fit, right? It fits *them* (the *Tamanos*) very well. And I think a lot of people start to recognize that after some time, and then they start to try and find their own way. And this for me is much more exciting, when some of the attitudes and the impetus for *butoh* dance start to become stronger than the forms that people have learned. (2011)

## Through the Mirror

I believe one solution for resolving butoh's own identity crisis may lie in the basic concept of subjective truth. As so many postwar Japanese artists asserted, one's own personal experience provides ample direct evidence, not for universal principles of behavior, action, or emotion, but rather of how an individual's idiosyncratic narrative may shed light on the nature of commonplace or shared aspects within a social structure. In the example of photographer Araki Nobuyoshi, while very few may share his experience (though many have tried), his work retains traces of the postwar, urban, self-conflicted, social milieu within which he came of age in the 1960s and 1970s as an artist and expressed in detail in his many books and articles of that period.

Likewise, we may view Ohno Kazuo as the prime example of this approach in butoh. Sakurai contrasts Hijikata's approach of attempting to mold his dancers into objectified models of his Tohoku cosmology with Ohno's reappearance in 1977 after a long retirement from live performance. Ohno was 71 years old, much more frail than a decade earlier when audiences last saw him, but somehow all the more effective because of this fact:

There is a "disabled" old man presenting the "disabled" body as is. First of all, I feel that in itself is inspiring. The important thing is not "he can still move well" but the fact "he can no longer move so well," or "he is decrepit." That is "already have become.".... I think that the "decrepit" body is guaranteed the objectivity and the materiality by the negativity of its disability. This becomes an obstruction to the subject's consciousness, to move the body or the audience's consciousness to reduce it to an "image.".... I believe that this is probably the congenital talent, old person's talent and disposition of "Kazuo Ohno," which Tatsumi Hijikata envied very much and sought a body that could become object just by standing there. (Sakurai 1998)

Ohno himself alludes to this condition in recalling a performance in Venezuela:

In life there is...something between life and death...like the wreck of an abandoned car; if we fix it, it could start up again.... Butoh's best moment is the moment of extreme weariness when we make a supreme effort to overcome exhaustion. That reminds me of my show in Caracas.... My body had grown old and I was working like a rickety old car, but I was happy. Is that what we call wearing oneself out for glory? The dead begin to run. (1987: 36)

Ohno realizes that he must see himself as he is and dance from that holistic self, regardless of circumstance, in order to manifest the inherent mystery of his performative self. He must, as Tamano Hiroko describes, "polish" the "mirror" of his dancing body, formed by the practice of embodying self-inquiry ("Who are you?"), for the sake of providing a resonant reflection of his existential state for the audience witnessing him. Moreover, this polishing reveals a cyclical process leading from the Lacanian *mirror* to the self-recognized *I* to irresolute *desire*, which, through its reflexive reaching toward either maintenance or renewal of self-identity, leads back to the mirror.

Jane Gallop examines Barthes's reference to Lacan's mirror in his autobiographical *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (1975). She cites Barthes's sly quotation of the key line from Lacan's essay, "The mirror stage: That's you." ("Tu es cela" in the original French) (Barthes 1977: 21) to caption a photo of Barthes as a baby on his mother's lap: "Since baby and mother in Barthes's photo are both looking in the same direction, the caption implies that they are both looking at the baby's mirror image. The caption further suggests that the mother is saying, 'you are that,' thus teaching the baby to recognize his image as himself" (Gallop and Blau 2003: 47).

My own reading, however, differs from Gallop's. Barthes's eponymous book title is already a reflexive gesture, implying that its entire contents, over 40 pages of photos and 140 pages of text, stem from his contemporary viewing of his previous self in the mirror. I would say that Barthes posits the photo as a mirror in which he sees himself through the image of his mother and infant self. As Gallop notes, "Lacan specifies that in the mirror stage the baby looking at himself in the mirror cannot yet stand on his own, but is standing with the help of some support, human or artificial" (2003: 47). Yet here we are witness to the 55 year-old Barthes, a world-famous literary scholar, publishing a complex visual and textual analysis of dozens of aspects—reflections—of his historical, psychological, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, familial, sexual, and professional selves. While Gallop asserts that Barthes's caption "seems to put the phrase 'you are that' in his mother's mouth" (2003: 50), the self-reflexive nature of *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* makes evident to me that he is speaking in the caption—and perhaps throughout the entire book—to none other than himself.

I view Barthes's book in the same way that I see *Kamaitachi*, as a subjective documentary. Hosoe, Hijikata, and Barthes all stare back at themselves through the mirror of their poetic imagination. *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* begins with the sentence, "It must all be read as if spoken by a character in a novel" (1977: 1), and immediately follows this statement with dozens of photos from throughout his life, thereby contextualizing these ostensibly documentary images as fictional. Throughout the remainder of the book, Barthes repeatedly muses on the vast workings of his mind through the mysterious and *possible* significances of his personal and professional insights, predilections, and foibles. Like butoh artists, Barthes looks to the past to create his future in the present moment. Like Barthes publishing his autobiographical fiction, butoh practitioners, through performance, return to their

mirror in the public eye, each staging their own *Kamaitachi*. Mizu Desierto dancing her Italian ancestors. Heyward Bracey dancing his African-American and Native-American identity. Alenka Bravo dancing her lonely childhood tree. Myself dancing into a police helicopter searchlight.

Even Ohno Kazuo largely followed Hijikata's template. Ohno's two most successful solo pieces, *Admiring La Argentina* (1977) and *My Mother* (1981), both consist largely of dream-like, imaginary encounters between Ohno's body and the spirits of the two real-life women who inspired the works. They are the twin personae that fueled his dance career and artist identity: one his "dance" mother and the other his birth mother. The psychic landscape of "mother-ness" in Ohno's oeuvre reveals him to possess, like other butoh artists, his own *Kamaitachi*.

*And my own work is no exception...*

*December 2011. Kuala Lumpur.*

*I perform two work-in-progress solos for the Nyoba Kan International Butoh Festival. The first is “Tsuchi,” a meditation on how the “seeds” in one’s body and environment are always already full of fertile potential and may be used to either nurture “wealth” and “plenitude” or wallow in “lack” and “poverty.” My dual costume refers to both farmer/rural/vulnerable and hipster/urban/protected personae. The soundtrack is contemporary and contemplative koto and guitar with rain in the background.*

*The second piece is “Flash Mixtape,” a hip-hop-structured, self-reflective sketch referencing ambiguous feelings of femininity from my childhood, my discovery of an awkward, disjointed masculinity as a teenager, and a disquieting ambivalence in adulthood towards my identity as an Asian-American. The soundtrack is Elton John, “oriental” bigot music from 1904, Prince, and Carl Douglas. My costume is b-boy gear and a long black dress with a big red flower. Not being a fan of didactics, I studiously avoid any overt indicators of the performance as autobiographical.*

*After the show, I meet Singaporean theatre critic, scholar, and performance artist, Richard Chua Lian Choon. We talk about dance in Southeast Asia, identity politics, and civil rights. He tells me that he enjoyed “Tsuchi,” the imagery, the staging, the various cultural elements in which it’s rooted. He says it has all the ingredients for a clear and stimulating interpretation and that, because of this, it was easy for him to make sense of the whole. He adds, however, that he felt “Flash Mixtape” was much more effective; that, despite its absurdity, he could really feel “me” in it. He says he could tell that he was really seeing my body as it is; that it felt in some way like I had lived this piece already.*

## Seeing is Being

After my performance in Kuala Lumpur, seeing images of Ohno onstage makes me contemplate Richard's comments about my dancing, which likewise point to Sakurai's comments on Ohno, all of which brings me back to Hiroko's question, "Who are you?" If Ohno's answer was to dance from the place of seeing himself, how might I (or any butoh artist) see myself as I am? Perhaps what is required is the raw, bodily experience of vision itself. As outside observers, both Sakurai and Chua point to the differences in objective and subjective interpretability and perceptions of personal narrative in the performing body.

For me, the lesson of Ohno is that you must see and show your body as is. The contrast, complement, or distance between what you are and what you are expressing or trying to become will be that much clearer and therefore stimulating for the viewer. For all its accumulated tropes, butoh has largely remained a practice of revealing, embodying, displaying, and performing myriad aspects of one's psycho-physiological being. Consequently, if one's butoh practice reveals one's desires, then what might a performative attempt to fulfill such desires mean when we are conscious of our underlying motivations?

Barthes implicates such a challenge in *Camera Lucida*, framing it as a choice for artist and audience between falseness and truth: "Such are the two ways of the Photograph. The choice is mine: to subject its spectacle to the civilized code of perfect illusions, or to confront it in the wakening of intractable reality" (1981: 119). In the context of action that emerges from a crisis state, where a primary choice exists between engaging with liminality or finding an arbitrarily stable place, the answer to such a question becomes a decision to speak through the language of the oppressed, of poetry and transformation, or the language of reified power, of myth and stasis.

It is a decision to become either a trickster or a thief.

## CHAPTER 5

### TRICKSTER

He was able to adopt a kind of theater about himself. Actually, first time I met him, he was really acting in a way. And that was good, because you can go anywhere when you're somebody else.

– Folk singer Mark Spoelstra on Bob Dylan (Scorsese 2005)

I have never been visited by genius and my appearance is far from that of a certified incompetent. Not a devotee of ghost aesthetics, I am a mere virgin. My semen should bring a good price.

– Hijikata Tatsumi (2000: 36)

The middle plane between the abstract and literal, between the living and dead, is where butoh artists operate, paradoxically striving to educe viewers' suppressed fascination while occluding their normative gaze. It is also the place where tricksters are said to live; a fertile realm full of schismogenic crises; a nexus of past, present, and future. This zone is by necessity a hall of mirrors, full of the perpetually signifying histories of real and imagined lives, reflecting a composite image of trickster that both shape-shifts and calls itself into question in order to cover its tracks.

To speak of tricksters—especially supposed “real life” examples—is to confuse, convolute, and multiply diverge from any single definition. As Lewis Hyde describes in *Trickster Makes This World* (1998), addressing trickster mythologies and their socio-cultural relevancies may be most effective by adopting a trickster-like path: “I work by juxtaposition, holding the trickster stories up against specific cases of the imagination in action, hoping that each might illuminate the other” (1998: 14). Or as Bob W. White asserts in speaking of trickster in Congolese popular music, “By calling up the trickster figure in a discussion of real people and popular music, I want to suggest that tricksterliness evokes a set of human traits and practices

that are socially relevant beyond their status as either structural or narrative conventions” (1999: 157).

In his foundational essay, “The Structural Study of Myth” (1955), Claude Levi-Strauss speaks of the ultimate efficacy of myth—and notably those of trickster stories—as being stimulated by their operative between-ness in the same way that ancient philosophers realized that sounds in language create meaning not in themselves but rather in combination (1955: 429). Levi-Strauss cites Saussure’s differentiation between *langue* and *parole*, between the revertible and non-revertible aspects of time in language, which allows for historical and ahistorical confluences of interpretation and meaning. Such conceptual unions, as when modern French politicians interpret the more static historical impressions of the French Revolution for their own agendas, represent a dialectic process that creates a third level of meaning that is more liminal and potentialized (1955: 430). Levi-Strauss also illustrates how such resolution of duality occurs paradoxically in trickster figures, which are “ambiguous and equivocal” and therefore apt for integrating contradictory aspects of given social structures, such as family units rife with oppositional and competitive relations (1955: 441-442).

From this idea, we may return to Turner’s concepts around the ritual structure of “social drama,” wherein liminality is not merely a naturally occurring element of individual and social identity but expressly employed as a device for energizing difference through the processual ordeal of a crisis stage of ritualized social interaction (Turner 1985). When the chaos-inducing element of trickster is added to such an equation, however, the variables begin to multiply. Thus is added fuel to the fire of an ongoing social drama of schismogenetic transformation of identity and social structure, the resolution of irresolution (*see Chapter Three*).

Before delving too deeply into the historical development of trickster theory, however, I

should state that this discourse is not so important as trickster's utility for better understanding butoh practice. I would further point out that there is a marked tension between the ideas of trickster as either hero or fool, with both concepts interpreted by various scholars for over a century (Hultkrantz 1997). The power of trickster to generate a transformative chaos, much akin to that of the butoh practitioner, is rooted in exactly this tension.

LaMonda Horton-Stallings, in her book, *Mutha' is half a word: Intersections of Folklore, Vernacular, Myth, and Queerness in Black Female Culture* (2007), warns that heroism implies the performance of and need for rescuing, but that "one of trickster's primary agendas is to resist the act of rescuing so that individuals or societies at large may learn from the chaos" (2007: 28). While trickster and hero both act as constructed and abstracted blank slates upon which we project fear and desire, trickster inverts the hero's authority, dismantling harmonious structures instead of displaying the skill to cohere, and thereby producing an irresolution that questions the beliefs underlying such emotions. As Kelly M. Cresap asserts in *Pop Trickster Fool* (2004), his study of Andy Warhol's career-spanning trickster persona of a faux-naif public figure and its relevance to postmodern culture's self-devouring irony, understanding how trickster elements function in the real world—and in *real people*—is a significant challenge: "What becomes of the epistemological eco-system, though, during an era in which...the fools finally get their revenge upon the savants, providing...a kingdom ruled and run by mockery alone? A sensible response to this scenario is to raise a countervailing voice of critique, after careful study designed to ascertain...what mortals these fools be" (2004: 227).

It's one thing to be a trickster, quite another to act like one, and yet again something else to revel in the results or suffer the consequences of such actions. In the postmodern era of contradictory, self-consuming imagery in popular culture (Jameson 1984), trickster elusively

confirms, denies, and alters comprehension of self and society: a ghost in the machine standing in front of our eyes, or rather what Leo Marx called *the machine in the garden*, a mythologized pastoralism alternately appealing to either a sentimental primitivism or a complex literary imagination (1964: 4-11). Susan Blakely Klein speaks of butoh artists, like recent trickster figures, as also possessing a similar dual appeal, which she characterizes as at once premodern—“a nostalgic return to the primitive roots of dance” with links “to the uncanny and irrational, to a kind of subterranean reservoir of raw sexual energy tied up in the intimate relation that primitive humanity once had with nature” (1987: 14)—and postmodern—possessing a “pastiche style, which picks and chooses among modern and postmodern dance techniques, elite and popular forms, with little or no regard for their original context or meaning” (1987: 21).

Butoh artists also attempt to combine premodern and postmodern liberatory states. Citing Bakhtin’s concept of carnival as a non-hierarchical space, Petra Kuppers states, “The carnival does not know a spectator. The experience is pre-modern, since it describes a society where the mechanisms of visual othering can be suspended. When the disabled, ‘extraordinary’, or other body is the freak, it cannot at the same time be a focus for communality” (2003: 45). By also employing postmodern subversion of spectatorship as well as a premodern destabilization of social boundaries, butoh artists attempt to become both theatrical and carnivalesque, liminoid and liminal, thus creating an experience of simultaneous objective and subjective perception of disability and abjection.

Early butoh’s play with premodern and primitivist tropes belies and is subsumed by its postmodern approach to any and all identities, personae, and social structures embodied within the practitioner. Thus, while the validity of trickster as an intellectual convenience used by scholars to generalize about certain mythic figures from various cultures around the world has

been vociferously debated, my conceit herein is to employ trickster's quality of simultaneous indeterminacy and inspiration as an apt lens through which to observe and imagine butoh's transformative potential within the context of postmodernism's recombinant paradigm. As Gallop speaks of *cohabitation* and Miller of *remix*, so Stallings speaks of *trickster-troping*: "Trickster-troping defers the privileging of one difference over another. Trickster-troping is acts of undecidability. The composition or deliberate use of taboo-breakers, minor gods, cultural transformers, and baad muthfuckas as metaphorical signs of difference and desire signifies trickster-troping" (2007: 10). Stallings roots this concept in trickster figures' ability to "explicitly deny dichotomies that might exclude or limit the development of cultural and social impulses and energies" through a process akin to Derrida's *différance*, which she describes as creating "an undecidable, a tool to disrupt the entire system of logocentrism founded on binary oppositions" (2007: 10). When chaos, contradiction, and crisis "become the thing itself" via juxtaposition, *différance*, and undecidability, one might therefore view the butoh practitioner as a postmodern trickster.

### **Give and Take**

I state that manifestation of desire is a choice between becoming a trickster or a thief because these roles together represent a range of possible behavior and action taken on the basis of desire. By cultivating a liminal state, trickster manifests *an empty room*. With nothing to steal, the thief who enters such a space is trapped within their own enclosing desire—the sudden anxiety of not having or knowing—and thus avoids it at all costs.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Trickster figures are often characterized as thieves, so differentiating between them may seem arbitrary. In separating trickster and thief, however, I distinguish between the former

Tricksters, conversely, suffer no such hesitation. Hermes is a thief who prompts others into motion by any means necessary. As Lewis Hyde indicates, in ancient history Hermes is the God of Commerce and the Protector of Thieves, but “pictures of Hermes usually show him with a little bag of change, just enough to get the trading started. He’s no miser asleep on heaps of gold. He loves the fluidity of money, not the weight” (2007: 324). Hermes’s status as a demigod, fully identifiable neither with the gods nor humans, makes him an ideal liminal being to navigate ambiguity, constantly churning the waters around the meaning of moral or immoral, sacred or profane, or anything at all. Further, the very act of upsetting balance—of propelling one out of stasis and into movement and new relations that produce greater understanding of self and other—is benevolent. Tricksters—even when they steal—give. Thieves—even when they give—take.

The pantheon of the gods in the myriad forms of European mythology illustrates this principle. For the Norse gods of Valhalla or the Greek gods of Olympus to separate themselves on high means that they have “an ego position to uphold; they can always be pinned down, therefore, caught in a streak of vanity. Hermes is untrappable. It’s not that he’s humble, he’s shameless” (Hyde 2007: 324-325). “Unlike the other gods, Hermes is never identified with a place. He can stay ‘on the road’ because he has no territory to defend” (2007: 324). Not only does he know no boundaries, they exist only for him to violate, reconfigure, and ultimately destroy.

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entity whose stealing expressly instigates new possibilities and the latter that divides and destroys. Hermes’s pilfering remakes the pantheon and the interaction of Heaven and Earth, whereas a biotech corporation patenting non-genetically-modified seed forms steals and encloses natural resources and the fruits of other people’s labor as its own “private” property. I mean to emphasize trickster’s effects within a set of values that frames any transformation acknowledging reality as a benevolent act.

Liminality, therefore, produces a *shared space*. Definitions create borders. The greater the definition, the greater the separation. By subverting defined states, trickster and its consequent liminality undermine defined relations between entities. When such an event occurs via crisis, which marks everything it touches with irresolution, identities become liminal until resolution, at least temporarily, takes place. Crisis creates a situation where liminality is shared and borders, differences, and dualities become amorphous and difficult to define. Observe artists who undergo extreme shifts in style or genre in mid-career, nonplussing their fans and thereby altering their consciousness of what is possible.<sup>34</sup> Alternately, communal victims of natural disaster, whose daily existence is suddenly propelled into a precarious nether zone of neither here nor there, must pool resources or face further and deeper crisis.

My use of trickster engages multiple characteristics of its “nature” (all of which I believe are at play in butoh): *a culture hero/fool binary, liminality, seeming amorality, and shamelessness*. Because butoh performance often elicits strong positive or negative reactions, I also extend existing concepts of trickster to discuss its effect on both practitioners and witnesses, of intuitive reaction, vulnerability, and activation of personal truth as a benevolent promise of trickster. I frame the butoh trickster as an unstable yet compassionate change agent.

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<sup>34</sup> Fans don’t necessarily appreciate or desire such messages from beyond. Bob Dylan may have had “Judas!” shouted at him only in Manchester, England, but he and the Hawks endured plenty of jeering onstage from Los Angeles to London over the course of many months of touring his new electrified sound. In the same year, Brian Wilson experienced a near-revolt from the other Beach Boys singers when he introduced his wildly versatile arrangements for *Pet Sounds* (1966). Even a polyglot master musician like Prince, less than three years after becoming a worldwide superstar with *Purple Rain* (1984), declined to return home with his *Sign o’ the Times* tour, perhaps knowing that its massive success in Europe might not be repeated in a Reagan-era United States where interracial eroticism, urban social commentary, evangelical Christianity, and androgynous identity weren’t often welcome into the same brainwave let alone celebrity body.

Trickster's inherent engagement with desire shows that nothing remains in one place, that life is never static. Tricksters demonstrate that all things belong to everyone and no one, thus generating cosmologies, paradigms, and other psycho-social frameworks that over time establish and maintain shared conceptual and behavioral space as an operating principle. They may exist only as abstractions, but their effects on real life are concrete and evident.

### **Many Faces, One Body**

I speak of tricksters as what does not so much exist as *operate*, and the place they do so is within people who either need, want, or do not want them to, making everything told about tricksters also part of them (Cosentino 2011).<sup>35</sup> While tricksters are seen as deities, spirits, magical beings, or, occasionally, real people, I would not consider them entities as such but rather what *lies between or happens to* entities since their essence is almost always mutable and ineffable. Tricksters are less figures than processes that take place within real lives and communities.<sup>36</sup> We may think of them in many ways:

energy	structure	affect
movement	kinesis	negotiation
tendency	transformation	function
perception	projection	pattern

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<sup>35</sup> Claude Levi-Strauss speaks of the “totemic operator” in *The Savage Mind* (1966) as that which is capable of serving as the means to resolve the opposition between nature and culture (1966: 90-91). Trickster’s “operative” function serves a similar, intermediary purpose between open and closed, known and unknown.

<sup>36</sup> Trickster as an academic concept may also be considered as a form of *prosopoeia*, a rhetorical device in which a writer or speaker communicates from the position or perspective of another person or entity in order to convey the essence of a more abstract theme or issue or to further clarify an action.

All of these terms are characterized by ambiguity, relationality, and change. We don't know exactly what tricksters are, and figuratively speaking (no pun intended), they wouldn't have it any other way. This mobility and mutability points to the idea that context is everything in the act of defining. The Cartesian "I" is a statically-determined entity, whereas the mutable self constantly produces and reproduces its ever-shifting identity.<sup>37</sup>

Tricksters essentialize change. They are amoral and behave as incoherently as they please. They are not (or do not consider themselves) beholden to deities or any rules of consistent behavior, real circumstances being their only mandate for action. Almost by definition, they adopt different personae as situations call for them. For example...

*Hijkata Tatsumi was a man.*

*Hijkata Tatsumi was a dancer, choreographer, director, and writer who came of age artistically in the avant-garde, cultural ferment of postwar Tokyo.*

*Hijkata Tatsumi created butoh, a performance practice and subaltern cultural movement fundamentally charged with manifesting "the body in crisis" against hegemony.*

*Hijkata Tatsumi was self-centered, autocratic, misogynist, and nationalist.*

*Hijkata Tatsumi dedicated his life in service to the alternative arts scene in Japan.*

*Hijkata Tatsumi was a liar who fictionalized his childhood as fodder for his artistic imagination and ego.*

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<sup>37</sup> James Clifford, for example, credits Stephen Greenblatt with making this fundamental point about the nature of ethnography: "The fashioned, fictional self is always located with reference to its *culture* and coded modes of expression, its *language*" (Clifford 1988: 94). Expression is always delineated and bounded by the current socio-cultural conditions in an author's life at that moment, which then change, making ethnography almost necessarily a fictional amalgam constructed from the disparate parts of one's research: a construct which may or may not have anything to do with one's actual lived "field" experience, making it inherently subjective. Clifford and Greenblatt share Rimbaud's observation that one "thinks" one's self into existence through the act of self-reflection (*see Chapter 3*).

Hijikata Tatsumi was a trickster. I say this primarily because I believe it to be true about “Hijikata” (as well as other “real life” tricksters whom I’ll discuss), a public figure with a multiplicity of selves—real, perceived, projected, and imagined—that maneuvered in and around his circle of intimates, fans, audiences, and detractors. As one can see through examining how trickster archetypes move through society, an individual’s perceived identity is fickle at best and, at worst, maddeningly amorphous. Operating synchronically, tricksters are both once as well as past and future combined (Cosentino 2011). They are the fiery yang to the yin of normative social order.

In the sense of both a court jester, speaking truth to power through the voice of absurdity, as well as Mikhail Bakhtin’s *grotesque* body, a manifestation of the transformative power of human nature through the “lower bodily stratum” (1984), I view Hijikata as a “dancing fool” for his unrelenting practice of refusing and refuting all normative modes of criticism and perception and for setting himself up as a liminal, indefinable, sexually ambiguous figure. Hijikata marked *butoh* as trickster-driven from its inception until his death 27 years later.

In Bakhtin’s terms, Hijikata embodied an early postmodern expression of *grotesque realism* set within a premodern social imaginary filled with ghosts, farm animals, teenage prostitutes, sickle weasels, and a cold, harsh, unforgiving landscape (Hijikata 2000). He forged a small subculture, gathering around himself a coterie of misfit performers and social dropouts as well as the *crème* of Japanese postwar, avant-garde, art circles (Kurihara 1996). After relegating himself as an “outlaw” dancer by refusing sponsorship from Japan’s national dance association after the premiere of *Kinjiki* in 1959, he became throughout his career like the trickster deity, Exu, as described by Turner:

(Exu) is the Lord of the Limen and Chaos, the full ambiguity of the subjunctive mood of culture, representing the indeterminacy that lurks in the cracks and crevices of all socio-cultural “constructions of reality, “the one who must be kept at bay if the framed formal order of the ritual proceedings is to go forward according to protocol. He is the abyss of possibility. (1982: 77)

### **Subverting Myth**

As I outlined in the last chapter, myth utilized as a tool of power produces stasis and is therefore non-transformative. Mythology is a social phenomenon, and without a dominant mass of individuals subscribing to a consistent belief system, its meaning and efficacy is non-existent. In settings of social tension or conflict, the corollary in such a power dynamic becomes trickster as a symptom of and reaction to oppression (though those in authority may also don trickster masks to obscure unilateral readings of their purposes). Myth is a language built to reify distinctions and hierarchies. As figures constantly on the move, tricksters are anti-mythological. Trickster is ambiguous, mysterious, poetic: a language built for speed. As a method for appropriating resources, limiting the productive capacity of those in opposition, and cultivating dominance through the inscription of superior and subordinate identities, myth becomes the currency of thieves. In their terrifying addiction to crisis and liminality, tricksters trade in whatever tangible or ineffable objects, identities, or materials will accomplish fundamental change while paradoxically denying that any such transformations are necessarily possible.

In facing dominance, whether in the form of culture, politics, economics, or class, trickster figures often avoid becoming an easy target by playing with their public images as incomplete or confusing myth production. Seemingly evident as a construction and yet

performed with absolute earnestness, and therefore extremely upsetting to many who witnessed him at the time, is the early Andy Warhol as he appeared in 1962 when he first gained notice for his commodity-styled and mass media-oriented silkscreen paintings. He presented himself as shockingly naïve and inarticulate, rambling back and forth in interviews through mumbled, monosyllabic semi-answers (Workman 1990). As Cresap describes, Warhol actively made himself unintelligible: “he asked interviewers beforehand to tell him what answers to give; he supplied misinformation about things like the year of his birth...; he denied having gone to college; he responded elliptically; he answered through a proxy,” and so on (2004: 12). Cresap also notes: “Warhol’s trickster performance in [the documentary] *Painters Painting* maintains a virtuosic seamlessness, like a joke that never announces itself as such by arriving at a punchline” (2004: 75).

Whether Warhol does or does not know what he is doing—and even if he does, whatever his intentions may be—we as viewers are never privy to what is “really” happening. It’s as if someone had distilled a kind of pure essence of trickster and laid it neatly wrapped on the doorstep of the evening news. What could be more distressing to an audience than to not know *anything*?

Another example from the same era of a figure that audiences convinced themselves that they understood was Bob Dylan during his early folk period. Having witnessed Dylan first-hand in 1963, Greil Marcus cites a kind of liminal mystique at play. Joan Baez, crown princess and queen mother of the folk movement all wrapped into one, introduced Dylan in an open-air tent at a folk fair in New Jersey that Marcus attended as a teenager. As he puts it, a “dusty and indistinct” Dylan, with shoulders hunched and acting slightly embarrassed, somehow both transfixed and confused the viewer:

Something in his demeanor dared you to pin him down, to sum him up and write him off, and you couldn't do it. From the way he sang and the way he moved, you couldn't tell where he was from, where he'd been, or where he was going—though the way he moved and sang made you want to know all of those things. (2005: 18)

Somewhat similarly, Hijikata's solution for avoiding being "understood" in public was to overtly accept contradiction and urge those around him not to avoid a split self, but to actively seek and embrace it:

I have yearned again and again for the meaning of where to start, a meaning I have not been able to ascertain in my own life and which does not come alive in my talent. I cherish wet animals and the bodies of the old, withered like dead trees, precisely because I believe that through them I may be able to come close to my desire. My body longs to be cut into pieces and to hide itself somewhere cold. (2000: 56)

Authority for tricksters is a strange bedfellow, something to play with, publicly disavow, and yet privately cultivate expressly to counter normative authority. Warhol, Dylan, and Hijikata never claimed to express or represent anything close to coherent wholeness, but neither did they retreat to the shadows. Instead, they plied the middle ground between authority and sincerity, objectivity and subjectivity, art and life. In each case, the dominant culture and those in power had no idea how to perceive let alone address what each man represented, thus allowing them to continue operating.

In truth, this may have been also the only practical option open to such artists. Throughout history, brute force usually has not been an option for defeating ignorance, conservatism, or oppression. Those in power in the mainstream are simply too powerful. What is more often required is a subversive change agent. Within the Western classical pantheon,

Hermes provides the archetypal trickster narrative for anti-oppression. He crosses the threshold between earth and heaven to steal Apollo's cattle and the food of the gods, in order to trick them into allowing him a place at their table as an equal. Lewis Hyde interprets this gesture, as well as that of many other trickster figures, as inherently anti-hierarchical (1998). He cites Norman O. Brown's interpretation of the Hermes narrative as running parallel to socially progressive milestones in Greek society: "He (Brown) therefore proposes this parallel: just as Hermes acquires a place alongside Apollo in the course of the *Hymn*, so in the course of the sixth century the 'Athenian industrial and commercial classes achieved equality with the aristocracy'" (1998: 206). Hyde continues:

There is little doubt that in the classical period Hermes is associated with artisans, merchants, and thieves, and the poem itself makes clear that some kind of "outsiderness" is at issue, and that Hermes hopes to change it. To effect that change he has... a method by which the excluded can enter a group, change its structure, and give themselves a place at the table. (1998: 207)

Whether as ancient Greek farmers or modern political activists, outsiders often find themselves strategically positioned for or inspired to commit such paradigm-shifting movements. And as those who have put their body on the line in this manner can tell you, these are guerrilla acts of civil disobedience. As Brown and Hyde assert, even in the form of a fictional narrative embedded in myth, they are gestures towards social justice:

Hermes' theft proves the boundary between his world and Apollo's is porous; it implies that the rules by which Apollo operates are contingent and arbitrary. Deftly done, a trickster's thieving calls into question the local property rights. Who gave Apollo those

cattle in the first place? Who decided he could set guard dogs around that field? (Hyde 1998: 210)

Hyde follows this analysis with an extended look at the real life model of Frederick Douglass, who throughout his life produced and transformed his own language, both properly and “improperly” characterizing his own social status, first as a forward-leaning enslaved man, then a literate former slave, and finally as a legitimized public figure. Hyde’s central example is drawn from a seminal moment described in Douglass’s *Autobiography*, wherein he speaks of his reality to a white audience and experiences a body in crisis of utmost proportions:

Douglass, in the North almost three years, still feels the internal prohibition, and must work to break it. (Douglass revised his autobiography several times; his 1855 version of the same scene is even more graphic: “It was with the utmost difficulty that I could stand erect, or that I could command and articulate two words without hesitation or stammering. I trembled in every limb.”) Douglass could speak freely in “the colored people’s meeting,” but that speaking did not make him feel free (it had never been prohibited). It is only when he can speak across the color line, when he can break the rule of silence and contest the white world’s fictions about slavery, that he truly feels himself free. (1998: 231)

Douglass’s crisis makes him vulnerable, which, rather than weakening him, empowers his voice and demonstrates the core of the democratic process in any society. Preaching to the choir is risk-free. Attempting to communicate—to commune—across deep and historically entrenched borders may engender a crisis state, the overcoming of which is a liberatory gesture. Even when free speech is permitted in the open commons of a democracy, real liberation still requires real struggle.

Hyde also illustrates his point with an earlier but just as seminal moment in Douglass's life during his plantation's year-end saturnalia, wherein the owners let the enslaved people run free with copious amounts of applejack whiskey, which induced a dispiriting alcoholic daze:

He is describing a self-disgust derived from bodily appetite. Playing to that appetite, the masters create the trap's inexorable logic: a slave craves applejack, his boozing shames him, and thus his station in life is part of nature. How does one unmake such a constellation? (1998: 236)

Douglass's solution is to transmute his own desire by resisting himself and thereby his master as well: "Refusing his own craving, he cuts the link between the social artifice and the body. To put it another way, because world and body are meant to pattern one another, when he reimagines his body he reimagines his world" (1998: 237).

This was also Hijikata's method. By refusing to embody the markers of capitalist hegemony as such in his behavior at the same time that he publicly declared his archetypal ethnic identity, he redrew the lines around the definition of both. Or as Hyde articulates, "In Douglass's case, all who refuse applejack also refuse the contained contradiction of Saturnalia and thereby create the possibility of *uncontained* contradiction" (1998: 237).

Douglass's idealism may also shed light on Hijikata's use of a primordial Japanese identity. Hijikata invented a mode of Japanese-ness appropriate for his historical moment just as Douglass accommodated his public identity to fit within a civic lineage leading directly from America's Founding Fathers to the post-slavery struggle for civil rights:

The words "pure" and "ideal" here alert us to the fact that we are no longer watching someone pull eternal down into time—we are watching a new cosmos emerge with its obligatory higher truths. The man who collapsed the shaping categories of plantation

culture with irony and contradiction has no trouble promulgating his own set of organizing dualities. Sacred and profane, heavenly and demonic, savage and civilized, just and unjust, decent and indecent—with these and more, Old Man Eloquent shaped and published his vision of a *true* and *real* America. (Hyde 1998: 249)

Trickster behavior and its effects extrapolate outward from their point of inception, meaning those who survive the crucible of trickster's crisis may then send their surroundings spinning likewise. And just as Hermes is neither an innate deity nor ordinary human, and just as the elder Douglass was no longer an urgent abolitionary symbol nor exactly an uncompromising ideologue,<sup>38</sup> tricksters are the reality of elicited change but stop short of representing it as such. They may engender new or higher truths, but they are not necessarily a part of the new paradigm. Once their utility has been exercised, their “tricks” employed, they often disappear into the folds of the temporarily liminal space-time that engendered them.

Such a fact points to trickster's amoral nature. Trickster is, if anything, an extremely practical and pragmatic fellow. Hyde concludes his analysis of Douglass with exactly this point, which may also be the point of trickster himself:

It doesn't feel quite right to say that Douglass is “domesticated.” As much as he may have accommodated himself to American ideology and religion, he did so in a world he had helped to change. If Douglass got himself eaten instead of exiled, we should recognize that American ideology was altered for having had to absorb him.... The point is simply that Douglass enters a house he helped to build. Like Hermes, when he moves from periphery to center, he changes the center. (1998: 250)

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<sup>38</sup> Even toward the end of his life, Douglass agreed to serve in the inherently subordinate role as Haiti's representative to the 1893 Columbian Exposition and World's Fair, where the rebellious Afro-American nation was relegated to third-class status as a “living culture” exhibitor. For more historical details and the controversy of Douglass's role, see Reed (1999).

Hyde also shows that Hermes accomplishes the same cosmological shift:

Remember that it is by restraint of hunger that Hermes makes himself a god. His private lottery erases the line separating him from the other gods; his restraint draws a new line joining him to them. Thus the boundary markers move; thus he becomes an eternal. To believe his story is to enter a new fiction, a new shaping of the world. (1998: 237)

Thus, trickster may also serve to instigate social justice. Just as Douglass and Hermes each shifted the power dynamic in their respective environments, so Hijikata reoriented the operative paradigm underlying performative embodiment in postwar Japan. His body in crisis critiqued and assumed the falsity of the social hierarchy within which he simultaneously placed his body. His crisis both revealed in and self-reflexively pointed to its own injustice.

### **Many Faces, One Mask**

I believe some clarification is in order regarding the nature of theft since tricksters are so often regarded as thieves. Hermes steals Apollo's meat. Coyote tricks the eyes out from other animals (Hyde 1998). Warhol denudes the spectacle and proscribed tragedy from newspaper images of celebrity and death, thus stealing away the roots of our collective idolatry and pain. Tricksters often seem to take what's not rightfully theirs. They upset the ostensibly natural or proper boundaries that define ownership and origination.

Another example that has provided an endless stream of critical fodder does so perhaps because of the difficulty in reconciling theft with cultural legitimacy. In an early career full of stealing, Robert Zimmerman stole Dylan Thomas's given name, tried Woody Guthrie's voice on for size, and, perhaps more impressively to those in the folk circle, effectively assumed Guthrie's dusty, rootless, and bard-like idiom, and then seemingly betrayed these precious "gifts" by

retooling and repackaging them for sale in the devil's marketplace, i.e. the pop charts. But what does it mean to have betrayed something that didn't belong to you to begin with; that didn't, in fact, belong to anyone, least of all a community like that of folk music, who made a life practice of appropriating musical forms and cultural personae for their own socio-political agendas? As Marcus describes in discussing American folk music, engaging aspects, artifacts, and practices of cultural lineage in this manner also works the other way around when the very genre within which one operates already belongs to everyone:

As they live in an organic community—buttressed, almost to this present day, from the corrupt, outside world—any song belongs to all and none belongs to anyone in particular. Thus it is not the singer who sings the song but the song that sings the singer, and therefore in performance it is the singer, not the song, that is the aesthetic artifact, the work of art. (1998: 28)

Such circumstances force the hand of artists and social actors to decide which path they will follow in engagements with culture. In the early years of butoh, subjectivity and mystery were all, and audiences were hard pressed to know how to react, what to think, or what to believe. In both instances, artists appropriated the very letter and syntax of their languages, employing aesthetic vocabularies constructed from the social landscapes they referenced: the history of socio-economic injustice in the United States for the folk musicians and the contemporary trappings of post-industrial, consumer culture for butoh artists. Yet each group represents a fundamentally different approach to addressing social issues: the folk artists opting for an idealized everyman, the butoh artists for an overtly compromised, contradictory self. The former is resolved and defined, the latter unresolved and indefinite.

The folk movement's mythology and early butoh artists' subversion are differing modes for cultivating meaning. The former may result in self-perpetuation of desire mythologizing others, the ones desired, a specific static version of them, turning them from subject to object in order to sustain belief in them. A subjective approach to manifesting desire, however, may simply be its embodiment, a radically holistic fulfillment of its possibilities, anything and everything that it has been and can be. In *Kamaitachi*, a "subjective documentary," Hosoe and Hijikata don't portray universal Tohoku images and bodies so much as *their own* idiosyncratic Tohoku images and bodies, thus fulfilling the oxymoron of "subjective documentary."

It is not enough to label someone a thief, for "stealing" may be either a benevolent or harmful act. Dylan copying forms and appropriating voices from the cornfield and back alley versions of the Great American Songbook to manifest social poetry sprung from his historical moment is a mirror and a gift. Pat Boone's thoroughly "white" rendering of Little Richard's *Tutti Frutti* (which Little Richard himself "took" from countless and perhaps untraceable sources in rhythm and blues) for a white audience that teenagers' parents could feel safe allowing their children to dance to was not only artistic and cultural appropriation, but also an enclosure of Black America within White American hegemony.

### **"You ought to be..."**

Another recurring characteristic of trickster, and one that I would propose is necessary for such figures to address themselves to power as such, is shamelessness. Hyde illustrates the connection between shame as a social control factor and the experience of one's own body in relation to the standards that elicit shame:

The trap of shame appears when cultural patterns get linked to the way the body is imagined, especially if the links are rendered invisible. Given such links, a person's experience of his or her own body "proves" the cultural pattern, and changing the patterns seems as impossible as changing the body. (1998: 237)

In "Inner Material/Material," Hijikata also pointed to this trap and its consequences in a postwar Japanese society seemingly awash in the superficiality of Western consumer materialism: "This big Tokyo is rotten with bodies. There is a lethargic generation arrogant with fat and I vomit on its lotioned and powdered pale effeminate skin" (2000: 40).

In "To Prison," Hijikata shamelessly proffers a vision of a thoroughly abject body, ridden by an earthy carnality and images of dirt, sweat, brokenness, and barely-veiled, pedophilic, homosexual lust as a form of self-exile into a subaltern netherworld of prisons and gallows. This realm was his proposed "cure," a ritual of affliction from which there was no turning back once one had entered the gates:

No theatre matches this one, which is equipped with the perfect mechanism for my destructive acts against production and morality. I see my own dance in a state of joyful group bathing in prison, and I see inmates on death row in the fall of modern civilization and in the family crest of its good sense. I see the original form of my dance in their walk. (2000: 45-46)

Hijikata's position exemplifies Hyde's assertion that tricksters negotiate boundaries of shame and subvert moral codes:

When the local code is insufficient to describe the situation...the creative person is the one who will readily endure that insufficiency and, from an "immoral" position, frame a new set of rules.... As we have seen, communities often establish shame thresholds to

mark their internal boundaries.... For Hermes the net confines—or, rather, it would confine but for the shamelessness by which he cuts the knots of its authority. (1998: 210-211)

This engagement with how shame operates is part of tricksters' relationship with the binary of sacred and profane:

Outside the church, people speak profanely by definition and, if they've been properly instructed, they are silent about the mysteries. Inside the temple, on the other hand, they speak of the mysteries but remain silent as to the profane. Such spheres of speech and spheres of silence, and recognizable boundaries between the two, are thus intimately tied up with any world organized to distinguish between the sacred and the profane. (Hyde 1998: 156-157)

Able to resist the bounds of shame, tricksters ply the murky waters between the realms of sacred and profane as well as those of speech and silence, thereby demonstrating that all are intimately and necessarily connected. Visually speaking, each binary intersects the other in a perpendicular fashion. Tricksters may break a rule by bringing one speech or silence into the realm of the other. Hijikata's *Kinjiki*, just like Stravinsky and Nijinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps*, displayed—"spoke"—aesthetic profanities within a nationally-sponsored theater, a "temple" of high art. Contemporary hip-hop choreographer Rennie Harris, who employed a "butoh funk style" to express dark personal and social themes in his 2002 solo dance, "Lorenzo's Oil," once choreographed a subversive panoply of racist stereotypes about African-Americans, essentially a jigaboo dance on the sacred concert dance stage (Harris 2009). Early hip-hop street dancers brought the sacred dance cypher to the profane ganglands (Chang 2005).

These sacrilegious acts also point to one of the reasons tricksters cannot exist in real life and the same reason they often do. It is because, as Rimbaud asserted, the self is mutable. The “I” in “I think” is implicitly impermanent. If it is more proper to say, “I am thought,” then what follows is an infinite number of possible “I”s that may be generated by every conscious moment in one’s existence. One’s ability to cross the threshold between defined realms, each necessarily marked by sacred and profane in order to maintain the social order by which they are initially generated, is largely determined by one’s capacity for shamelessness or at least the ability to resist shame’s moderating impulses rooted in mainstream culture. Moreover, this ability may change over time, even within the same individual. Dylan playing electric loud and proud to an auditorium full of protesting fans in Manchester, England in 1966 crosses the line and reimagines popular music, altering center and margin. The same man, however, recoiling slightly at the Newport Folk Festival the summer before, just enough to feel compelled to return to the stage and pay penance for his sins by performing acoustically after his now-legendary, first plugged-in set, is a wounded trickster indeed (Scorsese 2005).<sup>39</sup>

With its clarion call for egalitarianism and dreamy civility, the folk movement was dead set against shame, but not necessarily for the sake of dealing with it head on, but only in preventing or curing it, which is different than being shameless in the face of it or engaging in behavior which might otherwise be defined as such, which was Hijikata’s avowed solution. This was also Dylan’s answer in the months following his debacle at Newport, when he toured the

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<sup>39</sup> Dylan had shocked the Newport crowd without even playing a note, appearing onstage toting a leather jacket and four-piece, electric blues rock band, including blazing guitarist Mike Bloomfield, whose virtuosic, screaming chord play often set even rock fans scrambling for verbal descriptions. Folk music festivals were “an invitation, a gathering, a celebration of values...No one in front, no one in back, no privilege, no shame” (Marcus 2005: 17-18). What they were not were rock concerts, or rather the audience that night didn’t yet know that they could be.

United States and Britain with the Hawks (later The Band) as his backup. He restructured his set, reversing the order from Newport, beginning his concerts with an acoustic set, *then* returning after the intermission with the Hawks, as if to say, “I *am* still who you thought I was, except I’m *not*.”

Underlying such behavior, we can observe amorality and shamelessness as endemic twin aspects of tricksters. Transgressing boundaries without shame or a socially-acceptable moral compass is one way to increase the chances of achieving one’s goals. With such a mindset, there is no set of normative values within to make one hesitate, reflect upon, or second-guess one’s motives. Neither embarrassment nor caring can prevent trickster from getting (or causing) what he wants.

Amorality and shamelessness come together in the example of Warhol. While superficially he was more behaviorally tame and less overtly lucid than Dylan or Hijikata, his lack of shame came in all manner of visible and discrete forms. Framing trickster shamelessness as that which is anomalous, out of place, and therefore confusing and obstructive, Cresap enumerates a laundry list of Warhol’s shameless behaviors that people found most disturbing: “His seeming incoherence, quick-fix solutions, social and artistic opportunism; his gestural emptiness, glibness, unfeelingness, and amorality; as well as the apparently rudderless way he moves among images...and occupations...as if he were channel-surfing” (2004: 48).

Despite being regarded as amoral and apolitical, Warhol may be the example most relevant to democratic embodiment. Cresap’s reference to Warhol’s incessant incarnation of casual slickness in his social dealings illustrates an openness to multiplicity of identity enabled at root by shamelessness. Like Dylan and Hijikata, but shifting gears and altering courses at a much faster rate, Warhol was a highly public figure “channel-surfing” through a multitude of selves.

He was like an actor in rehearsal or a socialite staring into a full-length mirror every morning with a wardrobe full of options. This act was repeated ad infinitum throughout his life in public, however, making the question asked by such behavior, “Who am I today?”, also implying the question, “Who do *you* think I am today?”, rooted in the public’s assumptions and desires projected onto his public persona, making the question fundamentally centered around our own identity. If to practice butoh is to ask, “Who are you?”, then, as a performance medium, it is also to ask the same of the audience.

### **Who Is Speaking?**

As previously mentioned, what is required for butoh practice is an effective navigation among speaking, witnessing, and *being* one’s own truth. The difference between expressing something and literally manifesting it is the difference between objective and subjective; between the “I” that I define and project and the “I” that I newly produce in every moment. This distinction is essential for cultivating trickster’s subversive capacity. Too much truth-telling undermines the unacknowledged compromises of collective life. Dominant orders are potentially undone by knowledge of other, perhaps more egalitarian, possibilities. The limits on speaking truth to power require that at a certain point the speaker must find an alternate mode of manifesting and conveying truth to others, or else suffer the consequences from those in power.

In butoh, this mode is rooted in the life, death, and rebirth of the mutating self, ostensibly born from nature, fashioned by a mythological, domesticating order, steeped in crisis, and resolved by intuitive mechanisms. The butoh practitioner produces a subjective space of personal logic, a field of existential necessities and detritus from which a new way of being is generated. As Barthes describes: “There is therefore one language which is not mythical, it is the language

of man as producer: wherever man speaks in order to transform reality and no longer to preserve it as an image, wherever he links his language to the making of things, meta-language is referred to a language object, and myth is impossible” (1972: 146).

As detailed throughout this dissertation, butoh artists attempt to de-objectify themselves in this manner through bodily speech as refashioning and abjection. From the ethnographer-like fictionalization of self to postmodernism’s disruption of false binaries to what Allen Roberts, in writing about the use of recycled elements in African art, speaks of as the inherent multiplicity of “ironic collage” employed by the “devious culture builder” (1992: 63), butoh practice is a constant revision of the rules of perception in social action. Further, when butoh artists dance, by maintaining their ongoing desiring state and presenting the corporeal character of an irresolute, despairing journey onstage, they speak the language of resistant mutability. As Kristeva states: “In abjection, revolt is completely within being. Within the being of language. Contrary to hysteria, which brings about, ignores, or seduces the symbolic but does not produce it, the subject of abjection is eminently productive of culture. Its symptom is the rejection and reconstruction of languages” (1982: 45).

This is also the call to trickster, whose subversive maneuvers are fundamentally productive in nature. Tricksters speak the language of producers, and thus communicate beyond myth, cutting through the play of power dynamics. Dylan asserts this essential truth in speaking of the invincibility of traditional music: “Traditional music is too unreal to die. It doesn’t need to be protected. Nobody’s going to hurt it. In that music is the only true, valid death you can feel today off a record player” (Marcus 1998: 113-114). Traditional music, like butoh, has an indecipherable language all its own, sculpted by and steeped in socio-cultural exigencies of countless historical moments.

In *The Old, Weird America* (1998), Greil Marcus explores the world of mystery embedded within Dylan's Basement Tapes recordings from 1967. The author traces a web of direct and indirect connections between Dylan's opaque opus and the massive, encyclopedic vision of Harry Smith's seminal LP record set, "Anthology of American Folk Music" (1952), the first great collection of its kind and a bible of sorts for American traditional music enthusiasts and ethnomusicologists to this day. Marcus asserts that Smith's assemblage was not only an all-encompassing statement on what American traditional music had been but also evoked another symbolic America, one tending towards essentialization and mythology but just barely incapable of them—a place Marcus labels "Smithville"—an iconicized nation of human tragedy, triumph, and intense desire initiated by the first pilgrims and continued through revolution, slavery, capitalism, Manifest Destiny, genocide, class warfare, love of land, and all else wrapped up in America's grand democratic experiment.

Fifteen years after the release of Smith's compendium, behind a closed basement door in Dylan's Woodstock home, he and the Hawks, now renamed The Band, took up the mantle of Smith's vision, speaking of its contemporary social manifestations and extending it into their own poetic musical language, one that was yet composed of the same chords, rhythms, and melodies—the very bones and sinew of American traditional music. The Basement Tapes show that what was weird about the old America was still weird in the 1960s and possibly beyond: that America's blessing and curse was that it would never be satisfied with what it had. Even in the country's eventual, inexorable decline, it would always see itself as The New World.

Back in Japan, Hijikata and Hosoe were chasing through rice paddies and old barns in Tohoku in the exact same three year period (1965-1968) that Dylan electrified Newport, recorded "Like a Rollin' Stone," shouted down jeering concert crowds, crashed his bike,

retreated to the world of the Basement Tapes, and refined his craft into a new expressive form. The results of all three men's experiences debuted in early 1968 with the release of Dylan's neo-American album, *John Wesley Harding*, which culled stylistically and thematically from the Basement Tapes sessions, and the first public exhibition of photos from what would later become *Kamaitachi*. Not only did these works reinvent Dylan and Hijikata's public personae, but they wedded an essentialized, backward-looking, ruralist mythology rooted in their respective national cultures with a contemporary artistic sensibility—reflective yet opaque, serious yet absurd. Both works express an overwhelming desire to know this land that the artists love yet cannot ultimately fathom and perhaps love all the more for that fact.

Just as the Basement Tapes encompass a prophetic vision of an old weird America, *Kamaitachi* does the same for an old weird Japan, buried underneath a chaotic urban landscape (Tokyo as the new boring Japan), with only cracks and crevices to crawl through and relegated backwater farmlands full of dark, empty dreams as the only escape. It is the death of old world values at the hands of post-industrial might. Does this make *Kamaitachi* like Smithville, a photo album of an imagined past, not dusty but rather a modernist template for a new generation to carry forward into the future, into yet another New World? Does that make Japanese butoh artist immigrants to America like the original Pilgrims, like all American immigrants, eager to hold onto the mythology of their old values yet *also* transform such tales in their own manner, according to their own experience, to both proselytize *and* start over at the same time? Are butoh's qualities somehow quintessentially Japanese *and* American-inflected?

In light of such questions, we can inquire into the voice with which Hijikata spoke. "Kazedaruma" (Wind Daruma) (1985), the last public speech of his life and a free-wheeling statement on the self-referential nature of his art, is, like *Kamaitachi*, not just an image or a

memory of the artist's early-life experience of a "traditional" Japan; it represents a whole way of life, of being in the world, that wants explaining while knowing full well that it will never happen, just as in love, hate, desire, happiness, and trickster.

As Hyde states: "Tricksters use deception to generate material for storytelling, which expresses new worlds, life as it could be, making it also a generative force for the creation of language" (1998: 75-76). Tricksters steal, rename, and reuse through disguise, mystification, or whatever means they need in order to instigate change. Just as myth is the currency of thieves, poetry is the language of possibility, resistance, and empowerment. And just as *butoh* may be defined by the question, "Who are you?", so may we ask in manifesting and expressing ourselves through such a practice, "Who is speaking?"

### **Image-Word as Body-Text**

*"This was my first experience of intensely nameless beauty. Owed to manual labor, my father's sweat drenched tank top became transparent exposing his back muscles. His shoulders were inadvertently left bare and shined dimly from inside like forged iron. I fell in love and wanted to become that back."*

– Oguri (1990)

*"Undoubtedly, I too grew up melting my brain while drowning in the futon in the closet and eating soggy rice crackers, but those feelings, those emotions have now gone totally astray somewhere in my body and are unable to develop into anything even close to that terror I felt, wondering where I had gone in the dead of the night."*

– Hijikata Tatsumi (2000: 57)

In addressing the question of who is speaking, i.e. the function of language and poetry in *butoh*, we arrive at a fundamental aspect of the methodology established by Hijikata and extended in numerous permutations by other artists. From his early dance concerts, Hijikata employed provocative, surreal language for program notes, which he also used later in essays, lectures,

books, and even interviews and interpersonal communications. Moreover, as mentioned, when it came time to devise a working method for training, directing, and choreographing his performers, he invented *butoh-fu*, an entire system of language-based movement and an encyclopedic vocabulary of image texts. He worked, reworked, and added *butoh-fu* over the years, augmenting his lexicon as he created new pieces and worked with various dancers.

Waguri Yukio cites Hijikata's choreographic method as "to physicalize images through words" (1998), stating:

Butoh-fu seems like poetry, but is the "physical language" that indicates a dancer's movement, a method for a dancer's physical being, and a way of relating with space. Each word implies a certain movement, condition, a series of movement units, and a drawing reference to a dance image. In other words, it is a kind of symbol for the choreographer and dancer to share image and movement.... Butoh-fu uses words to explain matters that cannot easily be symbolized, such as a way of viewing and carrying an image that a dancer needs to be aware of when he dances. (1998)

Waguri also cites the indexical nature of Hijikata's method from image to word to body, but one in which the indexical referent is more instigator and inspiration than literal, objective source:

It is observed that there was a process in him, not only to use the drawing to give reference to form, but also to catch "the seeds of dance" that he had found through his unique way of comprehending a drawing with wording.... More importantly, throughout the whole of *butoh-fu*, a word is used as an index to awaken a physical image and, in fact, a word creates dance. (1998)

Thus, language and surrealism have marked butoh throughout its history as a poetic practice. Nakajima Natsu asserts that this fact is rooted in an essential aesthetic difference between Western and Japanese dance:

Western music is more melodic, so it goes to the sky. And Japanese traditional music came from religious chanting, so it's more language-based. Japanese dance was produced by language, not music, not melody. This is a very important point when we think about butoh. For example, kabuki came from text language, and Nihon buyo choreography is from singing. Also the foundation of bunraku. In Noh theater, they sing by themselves. Storytelling. All come from language.

In the Western world, movement belongs to dance, and action belongs to theater. After the Second World War, we all, the original (butoh) dancers, danced Western dance, so we all learned and copied melodic movement. But Hijikata said, "No, this is not our dance." So butoh is body and language, and Western dance is music and dance. Our dance is a kind of action and language. (2011)

If the form and content of Japanese dance is fundamentally determined by language, then the use of subversive, oblique, and absurd language initiated by Hijikata and still employed by many artists largely determines the form and content of butoh and orients it further along the lines of trickster. According to Hyde, tricksters "rearticulate" the "joints" of language, producing new linguistic connections in order to produce new realities (1998: 255-256). Butoh language serves the same purpose by instigating embodiment of surreal imagery. General expressive ideas may be proscribed, but their exact manifestation is up to the practitioner to invent through an idiosyncratic process. For example, no two mental images of ants crawling up one's leg will ever be exactly the same between dancers or perhaps even manifested by the same dancer over

repeated instances because the only thing set is the instigating image, *not* the resulting movement form itself.

This juxtaposition of image and body in interaction with the butoh body's multiplicity also produces multiple images and bodies in dialogue with each other, thus producing a dialogue between multiple and competing aspects of desire and reality: or, in essence, the democratic process. In attempting to embody an absurd and surreal image and enter a crisis state, we as performers experience a falling short of our desires, a visceral performance of not being able to have what we want, which then forces us to observe what we do or can have. And in our reaction to the distance between the two, we thereby learn some truth about our selves, enabling us to operate with heightened clarity about—perhaps even sympathy for—others.

### **Lies and “I”s**

In his analysis of Bronislaw Malinowski's writing, James Clifford cites the thin line between fact and fiction: “For Malinowski rescue lies in creating realist cultural fictions, of which *Argonauts* is his first fully realized success. In both novels and ethnographies the self as author stages the diverse discourses and scenes of a believable world” (1988: 109-110). As an ostensible “subjective documentary,” *Kamaitachi* stands as something between novel and ethnography, which, like Malinowski's documents, is also a fiction ostensibly depicting cultural realism. This makes Hijikata, as co-author and performer, i.e. subject and object, a liminal entity between novelist and ethnographer, between author and topic, representer and represented. “He” is a trickster.

But, like “self,” where does this “he” lie? There's a difference between Hijikata the man and Hijikata the cultural construct. The latter, as Clifford would point out, is a collective fiction.

With a wild man reputation and as one of the leaders of the Tokyo avant-garde, Hijikata was simultaneously idolized by some, reviled by others, and perhaps simply confusing or absurd to the rest. Simply put, in the public eye, “he” already becomes a product of our imagination, a situation both defined by and leading to projection of desire and fear. In the realm of fiction, such emotions bring to the surface images of both what we want and don’t want to perceive and experience. And when such feelings are projected onto a liminal entity like Hijikata, both deity and demon, we are truly at odds with our own desires. And if we can also say that this duality makes someone like Hijikata both signifier and signified of himself, then the fact that he reflects our desires may imply the same thing for us.

This then is trickster’s moment. The instant when he becomes real, when our boundaries are upset, and when we no longer know who “we” are because the fictional construct of culture upon which our identities were built has gone awry in our consciousness. Trickster points to this construct *as* fiction, forcing us to see ourselves in the mirror, as it were, in all our fragmented reality.

Ultimately, for all their mystery, deviousness, aggression, and play, tricksters are agents of the real. As Hyde says, they make this world. And despite our intentions, what we want or don’t want them to be, they are amoral because reality is amoral. Neither takes sides; they simply are. In terms of democracy, this is also to what Cornel West refers when he states, “the challenge is mustering the courage to scrutinize *all* forms of dogmatic policing of dialogue and to shatter *all* authoritarian strategies of silencing voices” (2004: 7). Moreover, by trickster’s framing of himself as naïve or imperceptible, others’ critiques of his supposed naiveté, blankness, or opacity forces people, as it were, to show their hands; to voice real opinions, to be vulnerable, to be real, to be realized and re-integrated. This is the proactive promise of trickster.

Each in his own way, Hijikata, Dylan, Warhol, and others crossed the thresholds of high and low, center and margin, perhaps rubbing shoulders at the intersection of the crossroads and taking a bit of each other's conjuring *juju* for mutual protection. In its most benevolent context, Warhol's stripping away of all veneers of authenticity left only post-trammeled surfaces for those with eyes to see to be simultaneously horrified, fascinated, and moved to prophetic insight. Hijikata's revivification of bodies and inner spirits lost in a cultural black void deadened by suits, televisions, and aircraft carriers was a postmodern Promethean gesture. Each man provided an opportunity, a gift, for society to view itself, warts and all, and see its true face, lowest depths, and highest potential.

As these artists showed, trickster is not only the need for the meat to be stolen but for someone to cut out the fat as well, to remove what's unnecessary for life to move forward. Trickster is the very need itself for shamelessness, lest the world fall into a somnambulist, mirrorless chamber of shameful secrets that nobody actually knows not to share. Without trickster, there can be no right or wrong, no light or dark, no life or death. Without the crossing of thresholds, those very walls would not exist, for only by violating that which is considered inviolable may all things that lie within and without be truly experienced as valuable or worthless. As the world has known in words since the Greeks and in numbers for a century, all things are known only insofar as all things are relative. Without a conductor to shuttle our minds, bodies, and spirits from here to there, from Heaven to Hell and back again, how might we ever perceive what lies in our own backyard, right here on Earth?

Finally, what are we to make of trickster's cultivation of potential in light of the world's contemporary challenges against greater social cohesion, mutuality, and sustainable values? A clue may be found in trickster's implicit notion of contingent identity. If every "I" is mutable and

every social body is subject to change via subversion or other means, then what becomes necessary is a communal paradigm that holds the space for all possible contingencies, regardless of culture, geography, language, or history. In discussing the vast undercurrent of multiplicity and mystery within American traditional music, Greil Marcus argues that such a model exists already, but that we must take care, not to attempt preservation, which serves only to suffocate its wealth, accumulated over time through struggle, pain, discovery, and triumph, but to embrace its variances and uncertainties: “Just as it is a mistake to underestimate the strangeness of the cultures that spoke through folk-lyric fragments...it is also a mistake to imagine that when people spoke through these fragments, they were not speaking – for themselves, as contingent individuals” (1998: 116).

Marcus shows how worlds hidden in music and art accumulate their qualities over time as a by-product of the natural process of fragmentation, accretion, and unconscious assemblage by all individuals involved in the cultivation of culture and who themselves are likewise fragmented, accreted, and unconscious in form and content to begin with. Performing trickster for an audience displays this region of humanity’s truth, i.e. how contingent our identities truly are and how what is necessary for survival changes along with them. What is therefore needed is an ongoing process of reconciling difference and regaining balance as needed, both within ourselves (between our own multiple “selves”) and between self and other. In other words, in contemporary terms, trickster calls for *democracy* and *sustainability*.

Before such processes can manifest, however, what is needed is a space within which sharing may occur, one in which notions of solid definitions and borders are anathema, else the community may find itself eliding into a process of division, objectification, and separation. Just as Marcus cautions us not to confuse culture with authority, participants in a social setting

potentialized by trickster must take care to create the conditions that allow for democratic actors to converse in the face of encroaching social tendencies fomented by ever-lurking power dynamics towards hierarchy and dominance. They must nurture openness in the face of entrapment.

In the space where tricksters and those affected by their actions—where shared assumptions become absurd jokes, where the usual way of doing things becomes the cause of immediate downfall, and where the tense pause of crisis management must eventually give way to the ballasting onrush of crisis resolution—all participants are faced with the choice of stepping forward into the unknown or backward into a fortress.

For butoh artists, this means asking not only “Who are you?” but also “Who are we?”

The result of such efforts is either a commons or an enclosure.

## CHAPTER 6

### IN THE SOIL: THE CULTURAL COMMONS, DEMOCRACY, AND SUSTAINABILITY

#### Who Are We?

To be honest, I don't need "my own dance." Is there anything as such? I can live without it or I can remain a dancer without it. But this body is me, and dancing is what this body and mind do, so I say "my dance." But it is not "my dance" as a proprietary property.

- Tanaka Min (2006)

"Like the old adage taken from Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* – 'so what if I contradict myself, I am large, I contain multitudes.' Who is who in a world where almost all aspects of human existence can be sampled and re-distributed?"

- Paul D. Miller (undated)

As demonstrated in the last chapter, butoh dancers' capacity to manifest trickster is central to their ability to navigate the moral code of a given social context. Mutating identity through the cultivation of liminality via chaos, contradiction, and crisis, butoh embodiment becomes a contrapuntal play of inquiry and discovery of self—or rather selves. In the face of myriad reflections and contradictions, the body in crisis may yet provide a focus, a central inquiry generative of new selves that can recontextualize one's environment.

Like Tamano Hiroko defining butoh by asking, "Who are you?", the question, "*Who are we?*" is her notion's wider extension and moves butoh to an explicitly communal space, where ongoing lives complement, impede, inspire, diffuse, or build on each other. Parallel to this notion, and in light of recent global environmental, economic, and political crises, the *commons* has gained vital currency as a generative concept for realizing ideals of cultural renewal, expressive freedom, social support systems, battling poverty, resisting hegemony, and sustainability (Benkler 2003, Goldman, et. al. 1998, Parr and Zaretsky, et. al. 2011). As modes of crisis resolution, butoh-based practice and philosophy have the potential to engage discourses

around these topics. While my project does not explore the practical history of the commons and its inverse, *enclosure* (with its consequences of exclusion), this chapter does take inspiration from their structures and meanings.

From its earliest period, butoh was an attempt to subvert notions of legitimacy and authority, thereby opening access to cultural discourse for social actors who might otherwise be excluded. Butoh practice is generative of shared liminal space, which in turn has the capacity to engender communal engagement, such as in Victor Turner's concept of *communitas* (1985). Such a space is concomitantly required for multiplicity and pluralistic dialogue, i.e. *democracy*, and the maintenance and nourishment of the general psycho-physiological ecology, i.e. *sustainability*.

Enclosure is the metaphorical and literal opposite of such environments. As I described in Chapter 3, enclosing communal space marginalizes and defines it, thus debilitating its power and influence. Early on, Hijikata framed butoh as an individualized response to hegemony. Butoh practice may therefore speak to recent social trends such as rampant corporatization and legally enforced elements of neo-liberal globalization that commingle privatization with massive authoritarian control. Such phenomena are series of enclosures with vast social and ecological consequences (Goldman 2006, Klein 2007, Leitner, Peck, and Sheppard 2006, Shiva 2005).

Opening space for the purposes of sharing and connectivity—physical, mental, and perceptual—makes its identity fluid, variable, and liminal and allows for a broad spectrum of potential manifestations of social relations, interconnections, interdependencies, and cooperations. By focusing on practitioners' subjective experience to fire their revelatory power, butoh performance transforms the space of the body into a “place”—liminally sited by Edward Casey between the wider landscape and the concentrated artwork (2004)—of structured

resistance and relational diversity.<sup>40</sup> By examining this process within the context of social theory and communal engagement, this chapter more deeply addresses the ongoing question of how the butoh practitioner may avoid fetishizing crisis and point to increasing social benevolence.

## **The Cultural Commons**

For this discussion, I speak of the commons not so much in pragmatic terms as what inherently circulates throughout a collective, consciously or not. As C.A. Bowers describes, the commons “even in ancient times” could be seen as nearly synonymous with culture, encompassing “every aspect of the human/biotic community that had not been monetized or privatized” (2006: 2). Due to the increasingly complex and vociferous debates around intellectual property and its politico-economic ramifications for globalized society, the concept of the *cultural commons*—as both metaphor and practical framework—has become a rallying point for resistant and subaltern discourses as well as an object of criticism.

Paolo Fiorentino, Martha Friel, Massimo Marelli, and Walter Santagata define the cultural commons as a “social dilemma” oriented by “culture, space, and community” that can be

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<sup>40</sup> Casey speaks of the artist’s body as the connective tissue that embodies “land” as a metonymic signifier between larger “-scapes”—bounded views seen by viewing bodies—and “works”—constructed entities that encapsulate our perception and imagination of the former (2004: 263-267). Hijikata and Hosoe’s *Kamaitachi* and Hijikata’s Tohoku imaginary also posit Hijikata’s body in as a metonym and metaphor for the artists’ root landscape in this manner.

Moreover, Casey argues for the relevance of locally-focused, land-conscious art to greater social awareness of environmental and other issues:

“This has political and social consequences which we cannot afford to overlook in an age of global capitalism, rampant internationalism, and equally rampant terrorism. In this age we need to find, and to valorize, a delimited middle region where place and space, the singular and the universal, earth and world meet and conjoin not only in the specificity of artworks and mapworks..but in public actions and social works that are equally sensitive to the specificity of land.” (2004: 269)

physical or virtual, possesses infinite “carrying capacity” due to its intangible nature, and is subject to either being nurtured or remaining stationary depending on how actively new ideas arise within its field (2010). Bill Ivey criticizes the looseness of the concept’s overabundance of definitions that nevertheless each feel static, historical, and “musty in its connotations” and in need of clearer operative parameters (2009: 25-26). Kimberly Christen decries the repeated default to a public/private binary in debates about the nature of control or authorship within the cultural commons (2005).

My rationale, however, for wading into a political and economic discussion of the cultural commons has less to do with its practical applicability than what *performing* it implies about social interaction; how what is allowed or disallowed affects how we perceive and learn from each other. My immediate—perhaps utopian—goal is this: if a socially-engaged practice—such as butoh in its most active context—can maintain and express an inherent desire for and open-mindedness around communal cultural sharing, it may serve as a model for cultivating certain empowering tensions inherent in a cultural commons. This may be possible if such sharing demonstrates the nonrivalrous nature of drawing on cultural resources that—consciously shared or not—are implicitly understood as a common pool of knowledge and ideas from which anyone is not only free and encouraged to draw from but always already do so, implying that greater awareness of and engagement with one’s own social nature is perennially in order.<sup>41</sup>

I believe butoh practice is capable of orienting itself in this manner. By performing seemingly irreconcilable conflicts between competing and diverse identities, butoh performers

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<sup>41</sup> Lawrence Lessig asserts that “nonrivalrous” and its concomitant inverse, “rivalrous,” are overly simplistic criteria for comprehending competitive use of common resources (2002). Rather, “what has determined the commons is the *character of the resource* and how it *relates to a community*” (2002: 21).

embody a multiplicity of competing desires—esthetic, cultural, political, economic, and personal—holding them together in the same bodily time-space, thereby also producing a literal manifestation of a cultural commons. At *butoh*'s most basic level, it can be seen to represent what Lewis Hyde speaks of as “the comedy of the commons,” a custom “whose enactment is social life itself. Community and common ground cannot be separated here; the latter is the stage where the former has its merriment, a reward that could be called “returns to scale” but is more simply named “the common good” or better yet “the comic good” (2010: 175-176).

The absurdity inherent in *butoh* performance—reveling in one's inner conflicts rooted in categorical distinctions—reveals and activates this open terrain. Hijikata and his gold-painted cabaret dancers posturing in the high-kitsch of self-exotification. Maro Akaji and another *Dairakudakan* dancer fencing to the death with their tongues.<sup>42</sup> When one realizes that socialization often pushes individuals to fulfill competing agendas, thereby placing them within untenable positions, one may be obliged not simply to laugh it *off* but *through* to another dialectic level of being.

More fundamentally, I would assert that *butoh*'s absurd tendencies claim a certain position within the field of political aesthetics. This site may be located within what Jacques Rancière calls “the distribution of the sensible,” which “establishes at one and the same time something common that is shared and exclusive parts” and “determines the very manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and in what way various individuals have a part in this distribution” (2006: 12). In speaking of contemporary art's potential for positing alternative political paradigms, Adrian Parr extends Rancière's concept of this “commons” of knowledge and experience:

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<sup>42</sup> Excerpt shown in the documentary film, *Butoh: Piercing the Mask* (1991, Richard Moore, dir., DVD, A.K.A. Production).

The political condition of art struggles to visualize, give a voice to, and render audible those who remain excluded from the dominant organizational system of knowledge, law, and social position.... Art can be a mode of political subjectivization. That is, when art redistributes the coordinates of how the sensible is distributed it can transform the hierarchical system of social and epistemological organization.” (2011: 8-9)

Artistic action can interact with the commons as a field of knowledge of what exists to reimagine possible relations within this field. This is the cultural commons as not simply collectively pooled “out there” but inherently within any and all idiosyncratically positioned persons who activate this field in relation to—and especially within—themselves. In Chapter 2, I described the development of numerous forms of such “political subjectivization” in the postwar Japanese avant-garde art milieu. Butoh practice, one of the primary forces in this movement, may be an example of what Lawrence Lessig calls forms of *disruptive technology*, which, more than simply implying a paradigm shift through innovation, purposely interfere with and even subvert normative modes of communication, commerce, and social control (2002: 91). Moreover:

Concentrating control will not produce disruptive technology. Not necessarily because of evil monopolies, or bad management, but rather because good business is focused on improving its lot, and disruptive technologists haven’t a lot to improve. The disrupters are hungry to build a different market; the incumbent is happy to keep the markets as they are. (Lessig 2002: 91)

While incumbency tends toward stasis, disruption produces movement. Contradictory influences disrupting the normative body produce the body in crisis. Just as disruptive technologies lead to less control and greater choice in the marketplace of ideas and goods, so butoh does not necessarily prescribe specific codes of movement or behavior but does advocate—through

embracing contradictions and cohabiting opposites—for multiplicitous being. In some sense, butoh practice is expressly designed to allow anyone, regardless of their relation to hierarchy, to embody any and all aspects of *the public domain*, if we frame the latter beyond legal limits and as the cumulative store of knowledge in a society. Hyde describes how any product of the public domain implicitly embodies multiplicity, or multiple or communal ownership:

Public goods belong to the public domain, that great and ancient storehouse of human innovation. The public domain surrounds us, but almost invisibly so, as if it were the dark matter in the universe of property. To illuminate but one case in point, every time you drive your car to work, you unwittingly take a ride on the public domain. Exactly how many inventions of the human mind are bundled in a working automobile? (2010: 47)

I view Hijikata's *ankoku* as functionally equivalent to this “dark matter” that seeps through the cracks of this “universe of property,” which is nothing more or less than the marketplace. Just as the public domain is an implicit force driving innovation, so butoh's darkness is the invisible force that drives its constant mutation. As market productivity feeds justly and unjustly off the public domain, so the butoh artist is inspired by the ossification of social conventions. In *Nikutai no Hanran*, with dozens of Tokyo's cultural figures in attendance, Hijikata breaks the choreographic codes of Western dance embedded in his training, re-injects them into his performance with seams torn and the connective tissue destroyed, and celebrates the resulting disorder, all for the audience's amusement, repulsion, and wonder.<sup>43</sup> As a trickster engaging the

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<sup>43</sup> Mary Douglas explains the relationship between order and disorder as one of mutuality: Order implies restriction; from all possible materials, a limited selection has been made and from all possible relations a limited set has been used. So disorder by implication is unlimited, no pattern has been realised in it, but its potential for patterning is indefinite. This is why, though we seek to create order, we do not simply condemn disorder. We recognise that it is destructive to existing patterns; also that it has potentiality. It symbolises both danger and power. (2001: 95)

cultural commons, Hijikata steals the communal conventions of Western dance, re-produces them, and submits them to a marketplace of ideas.

Looking to digital media, we may view a way in which butoh philosophy can inform our interpretation of contemporary social phenomena. Greg Goldberg examines how mass participation in the internet and social media produces in users an ambivalent relationship between communal knowledge production and meaning-making and the hegemony of global capital (2010). Because the latter is part and parcel with the nearly unfathomable amounts of data flowing through billions of people's lives, its dominant power structures hyper-delineate global economic exchange and cultural identity. Yet Goldberg sees in this paradigm an opportunity for greater cultural invention:

Vital power does not simply affect users and their lives from outside, but is constitutive of the user and its life, not to mention the liveliness of the data it generates and which often exceeds its boundaries.... Put another way, online participation does not express and affect a pre-existing self (user, agent, etc.) but rather is a form of self-making and self-unmaking. (2010: 750-751)

Through their incessant shape and identity shifts, butoh performers constantly make and unmake themselves as well. Just as butoh practitioners adopt any and all forms of dominance as elements of their anti-hegemonic behavior as they see fit, so many self-aware and socially conscious "netizens" use the corporatized social structure of digital media to fashion their everyday lives in inventive, recursive, progressive, and even resistant ways—with all the oxymoronic paradoxes so implied. Members of each group look to their own cultural commons as a space not only of identity and intention but also immanence of cultural potential itself.

## In Closing

“In the house itself, in the family sitting-room, a dreamer of refuges dreams of a hut, of a nest, or of nooks and corners in which he would like to hide away, like an animal in its hole. In this way, he lives in a region that is beyond human images.”

- Gaston Bachelard (1994: 30)

“Private property requires society to approve of it being taken out of common hands. Property is, in other words, social—there’s nothing natural about the way some people are allowed to exclude others from land, for instance.”

– Raj Patel (2009: 102)

The process of enclosure is related to the way historical narratives become collectively embraced. Casey speaks, for example, of how “public memory” may be dangerously reinforced and made static when the content of “individual” and “social” memory—both fluid and dialogic by nature—become codified and historicized under the aegis of a commodified “globalization without localization” (2007: 85). As I alluded to in earlier chapters, Hijikata was largely inspired to create *butoh* as a vehement rejection in mutable form of the United States’s attempted institutionalization of its own historical determinacy in postwar Japan. Thus, a discussion of history, property, and the body is in order.

In speaking of history’s disciplinary task of determining human understanding, Pierre Nora states: “At the heart of history is a critical discourse that is antithetical to spontaneous memory. History is perpetually suspicious of memory, and its true mission is to suppress and destroy it.... History’s goal and ambition is not to exalt but to annihilate what has in reality taken place” (1989: 9). If, as Nora claims, history is the enclosure of memory, then “tradition,” history’s tool for maintaining order through vague and slippery yet authoritative connotation, is the enclosure of the body, which, in its every gesture, behavior, and action, is the manifestation of everyday life. Michel de Certeau asserts that, just as history is written by dominant ideologies, so is the body:

The law constantly writes itself on bodies.... These writings carry out two complementary operations: through them, living beings are “packed into a text” (in the sense that products are canned or packed), transformed into signifiers of rules (a sort of “intertextuation”) and, on the other hand, the reason or Logos of a society “becomes flesh” (an incarnation). (1984: 140)

In this sense, even in societies without legal or condoned slavery, bodies are “owned” as property nonetheless.<sup>44</sup> Further, Rosemary J. Coombe and Andrew Herman speak of enclosure of private property taking place even in the virtual realm and intentional commons of the World Wide Web:

Property is not simply or even primarily a relationship between persons and things.... It is a social relationship between socially recognized persons with respect to real and intangible things...that is authorized and legitimized in particular cultural contexts. It is also a relationship of profound social power. The generalized failure to see the social relationships that produce the value of things we consider property—the constitutive misrecognition that Marx referred to as commodity fetishism—is one manifestation of this power. (2004: 561)

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<sup>44</sup> LaMonda Horton-Stallings, for example, discusses the tendency of even mainstream academic and literary critics ostensibly supportive of neo-slave narratives to “fetishize the word or privilege literacy” (2003: 189), thus reifying the dominant mode of controlling corporeal identity. She analyzes “pulp” writer Donald Goines’s novels as an example of a hip-hop-based, neo-slave narrative form that inherently troubles such distinctions, where:

Literacy, writing words on paper, simply becomes a means to an end to replace those other unavailable outlets in which the oppressed can express his bondage. In the hip-hop neo-slave narrative, literacy is not simply about learning how to read and write *belles lettres*, it is about maintaining, rather than coming into, consciousness despite the absence of body. (2003: 189)

Coombe and Herman point out that mass assumption and consumption of private property as a trope of capitalist ideology allows for the delegitimization and marginalization of those whose actions are not commodity-centered:

The ability to claim something as one's own is ritually performed in social interactions which operate to render the owner suitable and fitting to appropriate that from which he or she claims the right to exclude others. In the intrinsic alterity of claiming property as a function of propriety, the non-owner is a person who is not appropriate. (2004: 561)

Not only does this perspective make de Certeau's legally enclosed bodies possible but also defines non-commoditized modes of interacting, sharing, or knowing as irrelevant. As Anthony McCann asserts about the threat to "traditional" music's non-commercial modes of cultural transmission in the age of globalized commodification: "The musical practices that support traditional music transmission abide by models of creativity, collaboration, and participation that together add up to the antithesis of the text-based, individualist, and essentially capitalist nature of intellectual property regimes" (2001: 90).

Intellectual property is being wielded globally as the legal lever by which multinational conglomerates acquire patents to every imaginable "product." Vandana Shiva, for example, cites the case of India, where the federal government is pushing nationwide adoption of genetically-engineered, corporate seed while enacting a law mandating registration of all farming seeds—locally and communally cultivated or otherwise—thereby making it practically illegal to use non-corporate seed and commodifying the very codes of nature itself (2005: 151).<sup>45</sup> Likewise, Naomi Klein shows that massive social chaos is an operative component of an increasingly

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<sup>45</sup> As Shiva states: "The commodification of biodiversity through patents on life is offered as a solution to the crisis of species extinction driven by the monocultures in which global markets are based. The disease is thus offered as the cure" (2005: 50).

cynical and lucrative cycle of social bust and corporate boom: “Now wars and disaster responses are so fully privatized that they are themselves the new market; there is no need to wait until after the war for the boom—the medium is the message” (2007: 16).

However limited or not in any given instance, privatization is a mode of enclosure. If the crisis of war and its disaster response, i.e. crisis management, are privatized, then crisis itself is enclosed. This then becomes, not the liberatory, multiplicitous, and empowering form of open-ended crisis exemplified by *butoh*, but rather the end of dialogue and communal possibility. With no alternatives but the very destruction this form of crisis engenders and which wholly defines it, it becomes disaster, tragedy, and death.

It may be argued, therefore, that capitalism inherently divests not only mind and body but also the earth itself from non-commercial social interaction. As Shiva describes, this commons/commodity binary possesses threatening implications: “It deprives the politically weaker groups of their right to survival, which they had through access to commons, and it robs from nature its right to self-renewal and sustainability, by eliminating the social constraints on resource use that are the basis of common property management” (2005: 29-30).

In *Empty Room* terms, what we witness in principle through the “historical progression” of capitalist enclosure is the inverse of *butoh*’s potentializing methodology. The *desire* for capital wealth leads to the *thievery* of productive knowledge through the *enclosure* of practical resources. As I will explore later in this chapter, such a process is predisposed to subvert democracy, undergird hegemony, and minimize sustainability. Patenting seeds for exclusive use by corporate conglomerates, for example, prevents other farmers from further cultivating longstanding relationships with the seeds and their tangible and intangible benefits. Hyde warns of this commercial paradigm as “blind prospecting, this preemptive planning of claim stakes in

fields not yet understood. In these cases, we cannot even name the commons that are lost; they lie in futures now foreclosed” (2010: 70).

Such actions constitute thievery as prevention: stealing something by making sure that it will never be available. It is the opposite of butoh artists’ approach to manifestation—what I spoke of in Chapter 2 as “looking to the past in order to create their futures”—and realizing proactive identity, transformative behavior, and social justice. It is stealing the past in order to limit the future by reducing cultural memory and forestalling imagination. Hyde cites Martin Luther King Jr.’s son, Dexter Scott King, who severely limits all use of his father’s words and image without express—and expensive—permission from the estate, even for non-profit, charity, or otherwise “fair use”:

Our practices around cultural property allow us to be certain kinds of selves; with them we enable or disable ways of being human. There are practices that constitute us as commercial beings with “partial views,” and others that constitute us as public citizens. What Dexter Scott King has done with the “intellectual property” he manages is to move his father from one category to another. He has prived his father, converting a public voice into a chattel. (2010: 213)

Enclosing tangible materials away from the cultural commons results in loss of its intangible qualities, thus doubly reducing the common cultural stock and thereby the possibility for further culture based on collective knowledge. If we may, in a social sense, define people by who they are, what they do, and where, when, how, and why they do it, then enclosure is, in the purest sense, death itself.

It is no wonder then that Hijikata’s butoh was from the start so immersed in *ankoku*, utter darkness. The innumerable references in his writings and public statements to this shadowy zone

evoke not only death but a netherworld existence as well. In his “Kazedaruma” (Wind Daruma) speech at the 1985 Butoh Festival in Tokyo, he spoke of growing up in Japan’s rural north with an abnormal bodily awareness and what his eventual response was as an artist:

Inside my body even now is this feeling that I grew up with my head and the soles of my feet turned upside down. If you don’t do anything else, however, you’ll turn into mud.

And you can’t make do with mud alone. But I can, I know, declare that my butoh started there with what I learned from the mud in the early Spring, not from anything to do with the performing arts of shrines or temples. I am distinctly aware that I was born of mud and that my movements now have all been built on that. (2000: 73-74)

Hijikata utilized his lifelong sense of exclusion and marginalization to refashion himself into a liminal subaltern. As Murobushi Ko describes:

Is it alienation? Hijikata’s starting point became zero.... He doesn’t want to dance for the spirits or the gods. And he said if he’s feeling happy, he’s not dancing.... Maybe his starting point is sadness or breakdown. Separated from the mother ground. I say this feeling is broken, like an orphan. (2012)

Within a commons framework, by positioning himself outside of the mainstream enclosure, Hijikata declared himself as part and parcel of the field of the cultural commons, though with the added weight of a sense of destruction and death.<sup>46</sup> As I described in Chapter 1, Hijikata’s original impetus to create a performative decommodification of the body, resistant to late capitalism’s increasingly materialist schema, was a largely utopian gesture. The body in crisis is the butoh artist’s strategy for recursively negotiating the textually inscribed and delineated

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<sup>46</sup> I do not mean to assert or imply that Hijikata either consciously dedicated himself to the concept of the cultural commons nor do I assume that he would necessarily publicly support it as such. Again, I am most concerned not with what butoh practice has been but rather what it can be.

landscape of capitalist dominance, but is this yet a meaningful strategy in contemporary transnational localities?

In claiming a negative space for oneself in relation to the dominant center, one also plays by the rules of those in power. Francoise Lionnet and Shu-Mei Shih describe the standard manner in which dominant centers of social power are reified simply by resistance to them: “Critiquing the center...seems only to enhance it; the center remains the focus.... The deconstructive dyad center/margin thus appears to privilege marginality only to end up containing it. The marginal or the other remains a philosophical concept and futuristic promise” (2005: 3). Shiva cites the danger of overlooking such distinctions as leading increasingly to a kind of purely negative self: “Ecological and economic identities are linked to roots in a place and a community. When secure occupations and livelihoods are destroyed, the vacuum of the loss of sense of self is filled by the negative identity, an identity of ‘not the other’” (2005: 81).

While Hijikata’s early work and his Tohoku imaginary may have been a less extreme reaction to a similar phenomenon in postwar Japan, it was fundamentally negative nonetheless. Thus, is nihilism the ultimate result of such a method, or are there broader schema for the practitioner to adopt in hopes of manifesting bodies *who* exist not only in opposition to hegemony but within an antidotal, alternative paradigm as well? This question was implicit from the very beginning of Hijikata and Ohno’s experiments. The American occupation authority and the postwar Japanese government often feared the possibility of not only leftist and Communist but even anarchist revolutionary efforts (Dower 1999). As Shiva notes: “Dying cultures kill themselves, and from their negative identities unleash violence on others.” (2005: 114). I believe this is why early butoh needed imaginaries and not just *ankoku*; it matters that there exists the

time-space to embody and participate in a cultural commons and not simply an infinite darkness of loss, absence, and disappearance.

How can butoh move beyond its root stylistic parameters as a negative *reaction* to capitalist hegemony toward a wider field of guiding principles as a positive *response* to societal affliction while still maintaining its generative, crisis-driven mode of schismogenetic resolution-irresolution? What are the necessary conditions to allow for such partially spontaneous processes to occur? Moreover, as the collective butoh community navigates these indeterminate waters, there exists the ever-present danger of increased commodification. As McCann further states about traditional music-making:

We need to be aware of the human dimension of intellectual property application, the human dimension of individualist possessiveness, the distancing effects of increasing professionalization, the drive to convert folklore into spectacle, the change that all of these effect upon relationships, upon community, and ultimately upon the transmission process. (2001: 98)

Butoh faces the same dangers as it becomes an increasingly globalized art form with pressure towards codification and homogenization for ready access by mainstream culture, in which intangible aspects of any practice are marginalized, devalued, and eviscerated by a stratifying value structure based on consumer entitlement. While clear answers to this line of inquiry are for a larger study, I hope to suggest two possibilities in this chapter's last sections, namely *democracy* and, especially, *sustainability* as discourses which butoh practice may engage in mutually generative conversation. First, however, we must look more deeply at how butoh itself manifests the cultural commons.

## The Many and the One

In Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's critique of capitalism, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1987), the authors argue for a metaphysics of the one-ness of being and a social system in opposition to capitalism's inclination to separate and enclose:

It is only when the multiple is effectively treated as a substantive, "multiplicity," that it ceases to have any relation to the One as subject or object, natural or spiritual reality, image and world. Multiplicities are rhizomatic and expose arborescent pseudomultiplicities for what they are. There is no unity to serve as a pivot in the object, or to divide in the subject. There is not even the unity to abort in the object or "return" in the subject. A multiplicity has neither subject nor object, only determinations, magnitudes, and dimensions that cannot increase in number without the multiplicity changing in nature. (1987: 8)

Deleuze and Guattari find connection between this frame of understanding and the artistic process:

An assemblage is precisely this increase in the dimensions of a multiplicity that necessarily changes in nature as it expands its connections. There are no points or positions in a rhizome, such as those found in a structure, tree, or root. There are only lines, when Glenn Gould speeds up the performance of a piece, he is not just displaying virtuosity, he is transferring the musical points into lines, he is making the whole piece proliferate. (1987: 8)

This is the same as when butoh dancers perform the multifaceted contradictions of a crisis state. Interior/exterior, animal/human, animate/inanimate, light/dark, beautiful/grotesque, and so on are also so many "proliferations," each extending into an implicit conversation with numerous

definitions, identities, and liminal states. This is the dialogue that dancers have with themselves. This is the butoh artist's *One*.

Such entities as Deleuze and Guattari discuss are multiple and singular at the same time, thereby existing beyond integration: “Unity always operates in an empty dimension supplementary to that of the system considered (overcoding). The point is that a rhizome or multiplicity never allows itself to be overcoded” (1987: 8-9). According to the authors, there is only the One, and everything else is concept or power and reliant on coding. Thus, through an artistic process defined not by coding but by one-ness, the artist is able to transcend dualism, integration, or other dichotomous frames. Deleuze and Guattari describe what then takes place:

From chaos, *Milieus* and *Rhythms* are born.... Every milieu is vibratory, in other words, a block of space-time constituted by the periodic repetition of the component.... Every milieu is coded, a code being defined by periodic repetition; but each code is in a perpetual state of transcoding or transduction.... The milieus are open to chaos, which threatens them with exhaustion or intrusion. Rhythm is the milieus’ answer to chaos. What chaos and rhythm have in common is the in-between—between two milieus, rhythm-chaos, or the chaosmos. (1987: 313)

The chaosmos is the constant liminal state incessantly mutating in a process of perpetual recodification through the code of each milieu that it passes through, relates or refers to, or temporarily embodies. In butoh dancers’ method of engaging liminal crisis states generated from the attempt to embody and/or resolve contradictory, coded identities, they perform such rhythms within the chaosmos running between and through the milieux of their expressive realms. By diving straight into the heart of being of the One by juxtaposing contradictory codes within their singular selves, they simultaneously and paradoxically embody, preclude, and transcend the

overcoding of unity. By performing the socialized boundaries and connections of whatever milieu they are attempting to express, they reveal their—and, by implication, everyone’s—Oneness. They express the paradoxical nature of all being, what Buddhism refers to as simultaneous “form and emptiness,” where absolute being and utter impermanence inseparably coexist.<sup>47</sup> The dancer’s every gesture—every rise, fall, breath, desirous failure, and near-resolution—is a realization of yet another milieu, rhythm, and rhizomatic position.

Deleuze and Guattari thus advocate for the concept of non-dichotomous multiplicity and, implicitly, the commons. There are various and variable aspects of the One, but no separation. Socio-politically for the butoh artist, this frame allows for the metaphysical reality of the commons to combine with the dialogic multiplicity of democratic behavior and the call for sustainability, all via the practitioner’s simultaneous multiplicity and one-ness.

In previous chapters, I demonstrated how the practitioner accomplishes this paradox through the process of 1.) schismogenetically engaging chaos, contradiction, and crisis, thereby 2.) liminally remixing and cohabiting “self” and “other,” and 3.) maintaining this reflexive process through the embodiment of subjective desire and trickster. In Miryam Sas’s analysis of butoh and postwar Japanese photography, she examines how contradiction, crisis, and subjectivity may allow the artist to enact a wider scope of origination and expressivity beyond the individual and within any given social setting. She hints, in other words, towards a mode by

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<sup>47</sup> The first passages of the Heart Sutra read:

*From the depths of Prajna wisdom / the Bodhisattva of Compassion saw into the emptiness / of every construct / and so passed beyond all suffering.*

*Know then that in such depths / form is only emptiness / emptiness only form. / Form is emptiness, emptiness is form.*

*This is true of feelings, perceptions, impulses / and the rest of consciousness.*

(Austin 1999: 698)

which the artist may activate the cultural commons by embodying it through her or his practice (2011). Sas describes Hijikata's form as a space-time instant of resolving contradiction:

Hijikata condemns the moment of erasure, of forgetting, where the point of contact between an act and its refusal, between a person and her acts is lost. *Buto* becomes the effort to confront the moment when that terror or awe is still vivid...from a place of paradox that consists of an act and its negation at once.... The term Hijikata uses, *kigen*, implies a genesis, a beginning, a traceability. Expression...comes figuratively to encompass all kinds of creative acts, but also...a liminal place...between internalization of something from the outside and externalization/exteriorization of something from within. (2011: 163)

Such action is facing the time-space instant of crisis (actualizing desire), being liminally suspended between dualities (trickster), as the moment and place of origination; becoming what you need to and can be in an open environment of possibility (commons).

In speaking of the Japanese avant-garde photo-magazine, *Provoke*, published in the same late 1960s period as Hijikata's development of the body in crisis, Sas views the photographer's process of subjective envisioning as the lever through which origination—and thus individual self-hood as well—is transcended:

With the idea of the “anonymity of the real”...there is an attempt to get to the bottom of the act of seeing, which vacillates between the subjective and that which belongs to no subject. Moriyama states, “I suddenly grasp and put out...that thing which is most real...to me. After that has ended, it no longer matters at all who took the photograph; it's that kind of an act.” (2011: 183)

Sas cites photographer Nakahira Ikko's view of Moriyama's work as further evidence of the paradoxical transcendence of self *via* self-reflexivity:

Your seeing is the foundation. For example, you saw the special edition newspaper about Kennedy's assassination blowing in the wind, and if you had taken a picture of it, that would have been a completion of your act of seeing.... However, instead, it sinks deep inside you, with yourself standing there included—and that there might have been someone (else) looking [possibly at you]—and you try to put that out there to the world as well.... And you systematize the whole [aggregation] of these relations of seeing and being seen that envelop you, and what one could call the “one who systematizes these gazes” becomes that which would replace the photographer. (2011: 183)

This is audiencing—framing the terms for dialogue—via subjective engagement. Subjectivity becomes a means to establish mutual sight and acknowledgement and thus the conditions for multiplicity and dialogue. If establishing a commons requires redefining origination and property, then subjectivity as a means to opening one's originating vision to the wider communal context becomes a means to the end of greater realization and connection within society and beyond. Coupling this mode of subjectivity with Hijikata's state of liminal crisis as the space-time of origination thereby opens the practitioner to a place of communal knowledge, a psycho-physiological-temporal resource of being in multiplicity, i.e. a cultural commons.

Such a mode of encounter through mediated vision also becomes a means to challenging the authority of indexical truth, which is ultimately the tool of dominance:

It is not the “originality” or “indexicality” of the work of photography that is emphasized, because it could just as well be a recropping, a photo of a photo, or a reversed negative—

nonetheless the eyes “gain a hold” of things—an interest in “actuality” not in the documentary sense but in some more asymptotically liminal sense, an “encounter,” detonation, or provocation that breaks existing concepts but that also emphasizes a lack of mediation: the eyes themselves “grasp” reality and then “present” it (the camera’s cut) as a certain kind of evidence. (Sas 2011: 184-185)

In this sense as well as that of Nakahira, a commons may be a recursive space contextualized by liminality as encounter. If one’s frame of perception is primed for orienting experience as a juxtaposition of perceptual elements that incite new knowledge, then liminal form becomes an inherent provocation without reference beyond itself. A cultural commons, fueled by liminality’s potential and imagination, therefore gives the lie to indexicality’s postivism, just as a “fully” experienced photo (à la *Provoke*) or body (à la *butoh*) does. Such a photo or body presents itself as evidence of a photographer or performer having subjectively and “authentically” experienced a moment of one’s reality. It resets the terms of indexicality as it indicates the artist’s “real” experience, which is the one most significant and meaningful for an audience concerned with being presented with a “truth” situated apart from the dominant order. Such entities are *subjectively indexical*. They indicate the possibilities and multitudes of lived experience and are therefore generative of such, both within and as the cultural commons itself.

Moreover, because subjectivity is tied up with imagination as its engine for reimagining self and other, we must return to this concept as a key tool for interpreting *butoh*’s ability to create and draw from the commons for artistic and cultural transformation.

## Imagining Inclusion

In *The Poetics of Space* (1964), Gaston Bachelard speaks of subjective origination in a manner similar to that in postwar Japanese art: “The essential newness of the poetic image poses the problem of the speaking being’s creativeness. Through this creativeness the imagining consciousness proves to be, very simply but very purely, an origin” (1994: xxiv). When such a consciousness acts upon “the spaces we love,” i.e. those that variably or simultaneously nurture us and provide us a sense of security, it alters such spaces within our experience of them to be “eulogized” or “protective” (1994: xxxv). Our subjectivity creates “imagined values, which soon become dominant” when the space is “lived in, not in its positivity, but with all the partiality of the imagination,” thereby creating “an attraction. For it concentrates being within limits that protect” (1994: xxxvi).

Lived space becomes inherently subjectivized over time; and if we are, as Lippard describes, not only *in* but *of* a space, then lived space necessarily transcends its objective qualities and becomes a *place* (1997). If, as Bachelard asserts, this engenders a sense of protection, then the push and pull of opening and closing—of the commons and enclosure—are always at work within us through the concept of “home.” Home is a felicitous metaphor for activated space since it is both refuge and realization of self, the sincerest manifestation of how people protectively structure their lives. The desire for and tendency towards security, however, may also lead to detachment from core qualities of self that contribute to a personal sense of home and reify an objectified self validated by dominant paradigms that compete in the rationally-delineated worldscape of convention. As Yi-Fu Tuan observes: “What does it mean to be in command of space, to feel at home in it? It means that the objective reference points in space, such as landmarks and the cardinal positions, conform with the intention and the

coordinates of the human body” (2001: 36). Or, as Bachelard describes, domestic inhabitants look for validation of their intimate lives through external means: “In fact, they know the universe before they know the house, the far horizon before the resting-place; whereas the real beginnings of images...will give concrete evidence of the values of inhabited space, of the non-I that protects the I” (1994: 4-5).

This "non-I" is Barthes's punctum to the "I" of his studium; the trickster provoking crisis to the dismay of the emergency manager; the voice of poetic “truth” that gives the lie to the designed self. Choosing between such alternatives affects how our imagination constructs the psycho-physiological-virtual space within which we operate and determines our social efficacy. An open perspective invites intimacy, while fearful desires may situate the “self” at a voyeuristic distance, fomenting and augmenting a competitive, oppositional relationship to perceived “others,” thereby rationalizing a staticized, overprotected, and divisive “personal space.” For Tuan, cultivating awareness of the dialectic play between these human tendencies is central to social progress: “What kinds of intimate places can be planned, and what cannot—at least, no more than we can plan for deeply human encounters? Are space and place the environmental equivalents of the human need for adventure and safety, openness and definition?” (2001: 202)

As in *butoh*, we see here the competitive tension between the contradictory selves of I and non-I. It is the pull between memory—charged after decades of life's challenges with perhaps cellular-level notions of safety and surety—and poetic imagery—redolent with the ongoing potential for a manifestation beyond the self, one that steps, like the *butoh* dancer, simultaneously inward and outward with the same motion. Is this not the innate step of *butoh*, resonant with poetic connotations sought by Hijikata and other pioneers? Tamano Hiroko, for example, speaks (surreally) of *butoh*'s etymology in direct relation to poetic imagination:

*Toh*. Sunshine. Reflection in the ricefield. So you step on it. *Bu* is spinning, so it becomes trance. In the dance, you enter a trance, so something else is going through, like when you do traditional dancing. You become somebody far away. Dancing lady is coming through your body, and you yourself are just rented out. We pray for you. You are searching for why it's so different. If you get really into it, and get into trance, you can see there's no border. (2010)

The psycho-physiological experience of *butoh* movement reduces boundaries and minimizes enclosure. The implicit "home" expressed and shared by the *butoh* performer is her or his unique commons reflexively defined by this intimate place.

Imagination thus serves memory better than any repeated, reified image within a solid frame. Why else would Hosoe and Hijikata have chosen to imagine a subjective documentary of their childhood, a fictionalized version of their youth? Hosoe initiated the *Kamaitachi* project out of his desire to re-imagine his memories, "not as a documentary...but from my sight, from my eyes.... That to me was my experiment" (2010). Hosoe and Hijikata's early memories were materialized from the stuff of their contemporary lives as adults. The imagined sickle-weasel of childhood appearing through Hijikata's dancing body. The coldness of urban devastation and rural, destitute mystery during wartime displayed through barren farmhouses and poor, innocent children. As in the experience of the city-boy Hosoe lost in the countryside or the farmboy Hijikata stomping through the Tokyo wilderness, imagination drives our reactions and responses to desire and fear, guiding us into, out of, and through our mutating vision of "home," starting early in life:

Past, present and future give the house different dynamisms, which often interfere, at times opposing, at others, stimulating one another.... Before he is "cast into the world,"

as claimed by certain hasty metaphysics, man is laid in the cradle of the house. And always, in our daydreams, the house is a large cradle. (Bachelard 1994: 6-7)

Thus, we return to "home" as the cast and cradle of our real and imagined being: cast and shaped from our desires, and cradle and bosom of them as well. At home, we nurture and cultivate what we know and want, making it the source of both our greatest fulfillment and deepest disappointments. Just as in Hosoe and Hijikata's constantly alternating and ambivalent anxieties and ecstasies of *Kamaitachi*, perhaps nothing is more joyous than to have our self-identity validated or more sorrowful than to have our domestic sphere poisoned by disease, failure, or death. Such feelings are inseparable from our most private memories:

And all the spaces of our past moments of solitude...remain indelible within us, and precisely because the human being wants them to remain so. He knows instinctively that this space identified with his solitude is creative.... We return to them in our night dreams.... And when we reach the very end of the labyrinths of sleep...we may perhaps experience a type of repose that is pre-human...approaching the immemorial. (Bachelard 1994: 10)

In other words, if memory is to attain the status of generative relevance to our lives as lived in the present and future, it must elide its precious cargo of re-membered sensations, textures, connotations, overflows, abcesses, cadences, and intensities into the realm of imagination in order to attain a wider relevance beyond the self, but achievable only through embodied perception and projection, desire broiling in the chaotic mix of contradictory recall and critical mass.

This is the solitude that produced Hosoe's hesitant dread of the other farmchildren, undisciplined, unregulated, and feral in the eyes of this city youth. This solitude is also the base

of Hijikata's Tohoku home space: something neither living nor dead on a barn shelf captured by Hosoe's camera; curled up like a pillbug all day in his farmworker mother's baby basket; the trauma of suddenly not knowing his reflection in a water basin slashed by a sickle.<sup>48</sup>

We also see that Hosoe and Hijikata's memory-images do not evoke safety, but rather its opposites: insecurity, liminality, fear, imbalance, decay, absurdity, and raw desire; in short, the unknown. Thus, in the precariously negotiated path between memory and imagination, between the protection and exposure that solitude evokes, it is the image of the unknown that pushes us to recall—i.e. create—a space of wonder where we can connect not only to our own memories and fantasies but those of others as well.

*Kamaitachi* is thus a prime example of the porous nature of a cultural and creative commons that stimulates subjective dialogue and exchange between “actors” experiencing, witnessing, remembering, and expressing within Deleuze and Guattari’s “milieu,” Bachelard’s “space,” Lippard and Casey’s “place,” or, simply, a given community. Hosoe and Hijikata’s respective inventions of “Tohoku-ness” in *Kamaitachi* were mutual and dialogic affects and affectations within the aesthetic-cultural-historical space that they shared with others. They concocted their *Kamaitachi* selves as much as they were such entities already, drawing upon past memories, their historical moment of the 1960s, and their emotion, surrounding an imaginary that both artists would employ in future. This was their “gift” to the wider culture:

That was my personal document of my memories as well as Hijikata’s, and hopefully it would let just ordinary people think that those were part of their memories. This is also a record of, not the reality, but the psychology of the photographer who did it. And your

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<sup>48</sup> In “Kazedaruma” (1985), Hijikata states: “It’s no longer enough simply to be born from the womb. I am reborn again and again. I make such experiments anywhere at all. In the past everyone had a water jar filled with water. I used to slice at the water in the jar with a sickle. “Stop there, slice!” I would order. How I try somehow to stifle time” (2000: 75).

interpretation is free. Anybody can make any interpretations, any explanations, or whatever. (Hosoe 2010)

Hosoe is thus in agreement with Bachelard about the combined ability of memory and imagination to stimulate inclusion and a shared wellspring of imagery, knowledge, and being, i.e. the cultural commons. Or as Katsura Kan states in comparing butoh's rhizomatic nature with Claude Levi-Strauss's idea of embodying a *topos* of thought, belief, emotion, and behavior:

When he (Levi-Strauss) wrote down something in a book, afterward he forgot what he wrote. Because he believed, "I'm a place, I'm a topos. I'm just a place that looks like a junction." In a junction, we have a lot of things happening, but it's just a moment in time. Many ideas and many other things are going through the head. It seems I have my idea, but my idea consists of or is created by language, or culture, or ancestors, or tradition. My one existence is only a junction (at that moment). (2010)

Through butoh's performance of incessantly mutating junctions of harmonious, opposing, or disparate aspects of reality, a communal labyrinth of cultural identities and permutations comes into being. Metaphorically and metonymically, the body in crisis is always already the cultural commons itself.

Moreover, the butoh practitioner's journey through resolving tensions provides a template by which others may perceive, comprehend, or structure their own path with similar goals. Or as Elizabeth Carothers Herron describes the artist's ability to contribute in this manner to a sustainable civil society:

The artist must descend into the dark, follow glimmers and intuitions, and find the way back, and, in the mysterious alchemy of creation, both discover and make an image as the journey's yield.... Through the artist's image, we are offered a way of transcending the

opposites to become more conscious and to expand the limits of our empathy. (2009: 112-113)

### **Manifesting the Democratic Body**

In Spring 2012, I collaborated on a dance theater trio entitled, “Soil,” with three Southeast Asian dancers, including one each from Thailand, Vietnam, and Cambodia. In rehearsal, we explored how meaning is generated in the interplay of body, crisis, and dance. For Cambodian classical dancer Chey (“Kethya”) Chankethya, the answer was clear.

“I’m dancing democracy,” Kethya stated, very matter-of-factly. “Coming to the West, learning what’s possible, bringing the knowledge back to my culture. Just to dance for us is a statement. We lost so much after the Khmer Rouge. Just to dance is to show what’s possible and how you can be many things at once” (2012).

As director, I guided the dancers around butoh-based principles. “Soil” continued my ongoing exploration of butoh-based training, artistic, and philosophical principles beyond the confines of the butoh community. The dancers and I spoke of the *chaos* of their societies’ recent histories, the seeming *contradiction* of simultaneously embodying past loss and future possibility, and the performative goal of expressing the resultant *crisis* body onstage. Contemporary dancer Nguyen Nguyen, who was born in Vietnam and escaped to America as a child refugee, performed multiple dualities that he lives with onstage and off, including modern/postmodern, Vietnamese/American, and gay/male:

I play “Nguyen” represented as a certain idea or nostalgia. His grappling or coming to terms with his cultural heritage, while maneuvering through the contemporary art landscape, being a modern dancer in a white form. How do you

find ways to express your identity when the form is not necessarily suited for Asian-ness? I also fluctuate between feminine and masculine. Part of that subtext is the question of identity and being a gay man in Western society, but also in Vietnamese-American society, which in some ways has adopted a hyper masculinity as a way of compensating for being immigrant, never truly incorporated into American society. (2012)

For northern Thai dancer Waewdao Sirisook, performing her multiple selves as a “traditional” dancer rooted in the history and culture of both her native local region and the dominant national Siamese culture in Thailand is an ambivalent act in which competing narratives are in tense, layered dialogue (2012). As a working artist who has performed locally, nationally, and internationally, often under the auspices of government and private tourism agencies, she literally embodies competing cultural desires for a living:

We always behave like this. We want to show off. We don't actually care whether people are okay or not. We just want our nation to look good. This is my character in the piece. She just ignores what matters, caring more about how she looks but not how she feels. But she also tries to tell the truth whether or not anyone is listening. It's heavy and painful to try and be who we are not. At the end of the piece, she's not resolved, but she's not trying to pretend anymore. (2012)

Politically speaking, “Soil” is an attempt to resist the force of cultural enclosure by employing the existing contradictory expressivities of all three dancers. Towards the end of the piece, Waewdao performs a solo dance in which the competing narratives embodied by the choreographed and codified typologies of her local/national and traditional/global dancer personae come to an irresistible confrontation and cohabitation. Performed to an archetypal,



Fig. 4. Waewdao Sirisook in “Soil”, 2012 (photos: JaNelle Weatherford)

sentimental pop ballad from her youth, Waewdao’s increasingly awkward, halting, and pained gestures reveal a transnational cultural identity riddled with ostensibly rivalrous values, from national cultural ambassador to folk performance inheritor to postmodern dance artist. By the end of the choreography, however, she not only resists the multiple enclosures being inscribed upon her body from multiple influences but actively assumes this tortured body, taking on the mantle of, in Goldberg’s terms, a simultaneously made and unmade self. Like Kethya and Nguyen, Waewdao is dancing her own idiosyncratically democratic process.

Just as many scholars have criticized or proffered alternatives to contemporary expressive forms via changes to copyright and intellectual property regimes for the purpose of “democratization of cultural production” (Goldberg 2010: 740-741), so the dancers in “Soil” and countless other global artists and activists have re-appropriated and remixed their historical and

expressive identities. For example, Kimberly Christen highlights Australian Aboriginal efforts to structure their productive use of new media design to archive, protect, and project their traditional forms of kinship-based, knowledge proliferation. Instead of acquiescing to participation in an either-or paradigm of legally-endowed single authorship or a completely unregulated commons without safeguards against cultural hierarchies, the clans Christen worked with produced a scheme reliant on their local culture's social structure and intersected with Western concepts according to their own priorities:

The DVD's various incarnations, and the digital archive it postures to, rely on digital technology to preserve and reproduce cultural knowledge within extended networks that both include and exclude insiders and outsiders. Distribution is limited and enhanced. Knowledge preservation is the basis for selective viewing practices at the same time as it encourages new linkages. Remix happens and is both challenged and controlled by changing cultural protocols built from a traditional but not unchangeable set of standards. (2005: 335-336)

Just as the dancers in "Soil" required the fashioning of their own modes of crisis resolution and expression, so the Aboriginals found an alternative solution necessary, for as Christen warns:

Cultural and intellectual property are managed and mediated within social relations and produced through histories of ongoing political tensions. If we detach digital culture from its material and social networks, then the possibility for community content management and cultural redistribution along the open-closed continuum loses its multiplicity; it becomes an either-or decision instead of a string of if-then propositions. (2005: 336)

Remixing myriad "voices" of social participants in this manner allows their multiplicity to support a thriving dialogic process of becoming. Hijikata's dancers pandering to Japanese

salarymen and American servicemen in postwar strip clubs while appropriating characteristics of these environments for their incipient, anti-hegemonic, dance of darkness. American butoh artists like Shinichi Koga and Mizu Desierto problematizing their immigrant roots while plundering the richness of such backgrounds for expressive material. Nguyen Nguyen flowing smoothly through his Horton-based, modern dance training and postmodern quotidian gestural vocabulary in order to deconstruct his postcolonial/postwar Vietnamese, subaltern identity.

For all these artists, *multiplicity* and *dialogue* become necessary partners in the context of embodied democracy—or, more specifically, democratic behavior. Butoh-based practices generally acknowledge and allow for expression of a multiplicity of beings and voices within the individual. It is not simply some vague, idealized “nature” hidden in the dark cogito of butoh’s *ankoku*, but what has been socially repressed, oppressed, or marginalized. Manifesting the democratic body means dialogic engagement between multiple embodiments, ideologies, mindframes, timeframes, cultures, spiritualities, and languages. A collective context makes this possible, and, in this sense, the body in crisis is a manifestation of a democratic behavioral process.

Hyde asserts that such a contradictory internal dialogue between one’s multiple selves is a kind of trickster state of “motley-in-motion” (i.e. lack of firm identity), which can be positively “refigured as the babel of tongues, and its mental reflection as the polyglot mind. Regularly we hear of tricksters being involved in the origins of linguistic multiplicity” (1998: 299). Once trickster charges the space around him with liminality, it is not only conversation, which takes place between parties speaking the same language and carrying the same values, but dialogue, an attempt at communication between systems of knowing, that initiates as well.

Moreover, this liminal state—between crossroads and marketplace, contemplation and action, poetry and myth—lays a destabilizing groundwork for the democratic process by manifesting a “polyglot mind” and employing “linguistic multiplicity” in the face of dominant power. How clearly and effectively people arise from this chaos-induced hall of mirrors influences their future strength in dealing with other social challenges. Moreover, the social value of reconfiguring and reversing internalized abjection is not unique to *butoh*, or as Cornel West explains about the blues:

The blues professes to the deep psychic and material pains inflicted on black people within the sphere of a mythological American land of opportunity. The central role of the human voice in this heritage reflects the commitment to the value of the individual and of speaking up about ugly truths; it asserts the necessity of robust dialogue—of people needing to listen up—in the face of entrenched dogma.... The stress the blues placed on dialogue, resistance, and hope is the very lifeblood for a vital democratic citizenry. (2004: 93)

Lila Abu-Lughod states that culture simply defined by multiplicity, however—while it is less hierarchical, allows for real differences, and is clearly learned and mutable—is still not an answer to hegemony given that it can also lead to or reify rigid binary thinking, as with reverse Orientalism or purist cultural feminism (1991: 144-145). “Culture is the essential tool for making other,” she states, thereby giving “cultural difference...the air of the self-evident” (1991: 143). This makes any use of the term for defining identity, even for ostensibly just purposes, inherently divisive and still positioned along a normative continuum of measuring and holding power. Or, as Françoise Lionnet and Shu-Mei Shih describe, “authenticity” is “the ‘othering machine’

(Suleri)...that produces in the minor a reactive notion of authenticity in the form of cultural nationalism” (2005: 9).

Ultimately, both Abu-Lughod and Lionnet and Shih argue for a more diverse representation and embodiment of self as well as transversal communication and interplay between minor identities and groups. Abu-Lughod posits the concept of *connections* between researcher and subject on all levels, thereby increasing mutual understanding of each other’s purposes and natures as active and inquisitive “real” beings (1991: 148). Lionnet and Shih also propose, in place of yet further major-minor relations and postnational identifications across borders, the proliferation instead of minor-minor relations, where marginalized, subaltern, or local groups may relate directly with each other, according to their own ontological systems of knowledge and communication (2005: 8).

I would propose that these modes of connection take place already in the form of, not simply cultural typologies, narratives, or other information, but through whole social imaginaries that travel diasporically through immigrant populations and mass media. As discussed in previous chapters, many butoh artists have come to know the *Kamaitachi* images as a mythical landscape within which Hijikata *already*, so to speak, lives. Just as butoh practice is the bodily actualization of the cultural commons, so images that engage the initial performance of such and its imaginative perception are a manifestation of the democratic process as well.

Photojournalist Gilles Peress, in conversation with Susie Linfield, identifies exactly this phenomenon, especially in the globalized virtual realm, where, more than ever before, the widespread and multiplicitous viewing and interpretation of photo-images is taking place:

Peress envisions the Internet as a potentially antiauthoritarian tool in what he calls our “post-postmodern” era. “We are entering into an age in which visual language is defined

by a dialogue between photographers and audiences,” he says. “This means not just the democratic posting of images but the democratic *interpretation* of images.... There is no longer a voice of authority, with univocal images created from above.... We need deep humility, humbleness, in relation to our formulation of reality now.” (Linfield 2011: 257)

I would add that such humility is necessary when dealing with internal and external sources of abjection in one’s identity and environment. Hijikata made a visceral and common currency of his abject emotions and dealings with marginalization and culturalization. Expressing little patience for the false promise of democracy by decree, he instead created a modality for rhizomatically conjoining desire, expression, and perception from all sides—that of the center-subject, margin-other, and everything-everyone between.

Fred Moten speaks of how the production of such moments conjoins both the residue and erasure of subject-object (2003). In discussing Sadiya Hartman’s attempt to transcend the “hypervisible” abjection embedded in the collective consciousness of Frederick Douglass’s recounting of his Aunt Hester’s torture, he points to the inherent but necessary ambivalence of reciting and embodying oppression *and* healing:

Douglass and Hartman confront us with the fact that the *conjunction* of reproduction and disappearance is performance’s condition of possibility, its ontology and its mode of production.... Like Douglass, she transposes all that is unspeakable in the scene to later, ritualized, “soulfully” mundane and quotidian performances.... This is to say that there is an intense dialogue with Douglass...opened by a refusal of recitation that reproduces what it refuses. (2003: 5)

Hijikata’s template for democratic behavior accomplishes the same maneuver. The dialogic nature of oppositional desires is transposed to performative technique, revealing what is and is

not, what was and can be, and what is made and unmade, all in the present space-time of the body. By answering what he viewed as a false democracy with a broken, self-regenerative body, Hijikata initiated the development of a mode for democratic behavior accessible to anyone, rooted in life as lived, in all its oppressed, triumphant, confused, and mysterious glory.

### **Body, Soil, Sustenance**

In speaking of *butoh*'s relevance outside of Japan, Hijikata suggested that there was a Tohoku everywhere—an *ankoku* inherent in any place—and people just need to discover it for themselves.<sup>49</sup> Such a concept parallels assertions in transnational and globalization theory about the relationship between the local and global and more importantly their productive inseparability (Appadurai 1996, Arnove and Torres 2003, DeKoven et. al. 2001). Likewise, much sustainability discourse is grounded in advocacy for local growth, production, and consumption as a matter of not simply reducing and refining our industrial footprint but more importantly entering into a maximally symbiotic relationship with the environment that acknowledges human inseparability with it, thereby reducing intellectual, cultural, and legal boundaries between humans and “Nature” (Asch 2007, Bratspies 2006/2007, Faber 2011, Parr 2011, Shiva 2005). Similar to the dialogic behavior that engenders the democratic body, interactive and holistic behavior may support a *sustainable body*, one that frames itself around and responds simultaneously to local and global conditions.

Generally speaking, a *butoh* body does the same through employment of its given status, i.e. its body *as is*, the raw material for engaging crisis and resolution. In the binary terms of

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<sup>49</sup> “Although it is Tohoku kabuki, there is a Tohoku in England. The utter darkness exists throughout the world, doesn’t it? To think is the dark” (Cited in Kurihara 2000: 21).

butoh's dialectic political process, this body is the local to late capitalist hegemony's global. In socio-environmental terms, butoh practice is oriented as an internalized embrace of the value of the local, though such a paradigm is incumbent upon each practitioner to manifest according to their own "local," i.e. personal, conditions.<sup>50</sup>

A deeper question remains, however, around the nature of the practitioner's behavior in relation to the environmental systems and social ecologies in which they operate. Up to now, butoh has been largely reactionary in relation to capitalism, but I believe its specific form of negation provides as much a way into a broader discourse as it has spawned compulsive behavior of lineage-obsessed acolytes.

Jeffrey A. Bell demonstrates how Deleuze and Guattari's reveal capitalism's tendency to foment both the "institutional violence" of quantification within hierarchical power structures as well as the "nomadic violence" of market-driven chaos inspired by capitalist aspirational behavior (2011). Bell interprets the pair's writing as identifying capitalism's propensity for oscillating between these extremes due to its paradoxically authoritarian and open-ended structure. Further, the artist—especially the martial artist—may effectively negotiate this paradox via the "warrior" method of doing and not-doing, which undoes the subject "by affirming (capitalism's) very tendency to undermine and undo codes, subjects, and axioms, but affirming it in a way that does not lead to a collapse into stratification or chaos: it allows for 'ways'" (2011: 230). Bell concludes his arguments by asserting, "Instead of an unsustainable subordination of productive processes to the demands of the extensive quantifications of the

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<sup>50</sup> Similarly, in citing the dangers of an overdefined "collective memory" by Americans after 9/11, Edward Casey argues for wider consideration of the personal in the local—citing the flexibility of Deleuze and Guattari's "local absolute" and "non-limited locality" (1987: 382-383)—in order to foster a "public memory" that is, instead of reactionary, static, and oppositional, rather "never fully and finally *made*" but "always in the making, giving us to the care and vigilance so often lacking at the site of the initial trauma" (2007: 86).

global subject of capitalism, the task is the undoing of this global subject and the creative invention of ‘ways’ that swing between unsustainable alternatives” (2011: 239).

Following Bell’s thinking, I draw parallels between butoh philosophy and how capitalism’s limits and potentialities may be elucidated by the functionally uncodified “ways” that artists negotiate their communal presence and interaction with others with whom they are in cooperation or opposition. Butoh’s uncodified philosophical frameworks of resolving/not resolving crisis may allow us to inventively comprehend how intra-and interpersonal tensions in society may be addressed. The butoh artist’s “way” of embodying crisis by appropriating contradictory modes of being for transformative purposes echoes Bell’s call for a sustainable method of balancing—if not resolving—capitalism’s violent swings between quantification and chaos identified by Deleuze and Guattari. If sustainability requires what Adrian Parr describes as “a historical frame of reference to combine care for other than human species with social justice concerns as a way of invoking the emancipatory potential of the future” (2011: 9), then butoh practice, with its integration of a subaltern ethos and emancipatory corporeality, must also fulfill its potential as a method for cultivating sustainability.

Roland Faber points to such a mode in his discussion of the potential for cultural symbolizations to aid in our imagination of sustainable futures. Faber identifies the production of a “dangerous” place where perceptions, symbols, and values between humanity and “nature” are decomposed through a process of negotiating their shared contingency—their sameness—within the vastness of Deleuze and Guattari’s chaosmos (2011: 249). Faber asserts that human sustainability is dependent upon this process of engaging the dissolute “risk” of such a process:

Sustainability may only be addressed *from* this dangerous place and, hence, is *necessarily* arbitrary because of this *decompositional connectivity*. Accordingly, the art of valuation

is a negotiation of fire: in this fire, values, virtues, and virtuals are created and dismembered. The *art* is to go through the fire of decomposition such that permanence, but not intensity, might be lost. (2011: 249)

A similar assertion can be made about butoh practice, which fosters the image and embodiment of impermanence through visceral performative means. The first generation of butoh artists sought to energize and *sustain* a culturalized corporeal identity in opposition to a homogenizing modernization. In the following decades, myriad practitioners struggled with their individual perceptions and interpretations of fundamental principles and expressive forms laid down by Hijikata, Ohno, and others. Now, butoh-based artists globally are faced with the challenge of identifying transnational, intercultural, and interdisciplinary modes rooted in the pioneers' establishment of an artistic approach to sustainable culture via, in Faber's terms, the "decompositional connectivity" of butoh's schismogenetic engagement. The chaos, contradiction, and crisis of butoh practice "decompose" arbitrary schemes embodied in socialized and domesticated corporealities, thereby allowing for intuitive "connectivities" to form from the ashes of one's artistic "fire."

The "Soil" performance was, I hope, an example of this process. One of the reasons I chose the title "Soil" is that the word with its myriad connotations may serve as a metaphor for the ubiquitous and abundant yet vulnerable potential for knowledge, identity, and action that is the cultural commons. Soil is symbolic of the earth, landscape, or environment within which events take place. How such a realm is imagined, enlivened, and utilized determines the fundamental health and sustainability of a society.

The beneficent richness of soil makes it liminal as well and therefore apt for the performers' life situations. Similar to the manner in which many postwar Japanese avant-gardists

entered into an oppositional engagement with dominance, each dancer in “Soil” was born into a culture cultivated over centuries yet forced to adapt to rapid change in a modern era of competing transnational paradigms and politico-historical narratives. In negotiating the interplay of inherited and invented selves in “Soil,” the dancers and I sought an alternative approach beyond mere reaction to cultural dominance that resolves its effects, even when the qualities of being marginalized “others” are already internalized into the dancers’ “selves.” In her book, *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler similarly challenges such binary thinking:

What configuration of power constructs the subject and the Other, that binary relation between “men” and “women,” and the internal stability of those terms.... What happens to the subject and to the stability of gender categories when the epistemic regime of presumptive heterosexuality is unmasked as that which produces and reifies these ostensible categories of ontology? (1990: viii)

In other words, when the dominant discourse encloses one within a definition of the less-valuable Other, the entire paradigm from which such categories are derived comes into question. “Soil,” however, is not simply a depiction of subalterns resisting hegemony, though that subtext is present. What became more significant for the actors was to inquire reflexively into their identities and fashion a performative mode of being by which they might sustain benevolent aspects of their “traditional” yet always mutating cultures.

The dancers do not represent simply commodities that speak for themselves nor simply *other*-ed selves gazing back at a masculine, hetero-normative center. These bodies speak paradoxically but also consciously and explicitly *as* subjectively identified *and* externally inscribed entities. They purposely cohabit, sample, and remix all aspects of their contradictory selves.

Just as butoh artists employ memory and imagination to reorient themselves, the dancers in “Soil” submit themselves to their respective crises rooted in personal and collective trauma. Nguyen was born in Saigon in 1975, the year “The American War” ended and just as his father was sent to reeducation camp by the Communist authorities. When he escaped in 1980 by boat with his mother, it was the second time she had fled the Communists, the first being in 1955 when her parents escaped from North to South after the fall of the French colonial regime. He spent his sixth and seventh birthdays in a refugee camp on the Malaysian island of Pulau Bidong before arriving in America, where, as he says onstage, “I stepped off the plane and saw my breath in the cold air for the very first time.”

Trained as a classical dancer from the age of five, Kethya was born in 1987, eight years after the end of the Khmer Rouge genocide, in which the vast majority of artists and cultural workers in Cambodia perished. When Kethya dances, she invokes not only the gods and spirits but also the lost, found, preserved, and reconstructed traditions of her forebears, all of which are again in danger of being lost in the midst of globalized culture:

This is a question I ask myself and that other people in Cambodia ask themselves. Should we forget about the past and just move forward, or should we respect the past and tradition only? So it's a big question for my generation in Cambodia right now because we are about to lose the tradition, what we've been handed so far, and we want to catch up with the world and everything. So how can we balance all that? It's my crisis. (Chey 2012)

Waewdao was born in 1977 in northern Thailand, the so-called *Lanna* region, where a contested historical narrative has brewed for almost a century and a half since the unification of Thai kingdoms and lands and the suppression of Lanna culture (Sirisook 2012). Lanna schoolchildren,

for example, are often not allowed to speak *gam mueang*, their regional dialect, but they are permitted to use videogames, cellphones, and iPads. Lanna dance is taught in school but not included by name in discourses of national cultural identity. Lanna dancers, especially pale-skinned females arrayed in languidly choreographed spectacles, are regularly employed as visual elements marketed for the international tourist gaze, an enclosed, static space devoid of imagination. In the case of Thailand—marketed internationally as “The Land of Smiles”—commodities don’t so much speak as constantly beam a vitiated, depersonalized welcome.

For each dancer, embodied crisis instigated by chaos and contradiction is not so much a performance as a way of life. But what to do about this? Leave the status quo unchallenged in a downward spiral of increasingly disenfranchised solipsism, or resolve crisis by any means necessary, even if it means codifying that which is spontaneously generated, thus reifying a new hierarchy? Or is there a middle way, one that not only embraces the dancers’ paradox but provides a virtual method by which they can navigate the disorderly liminal terrain of nationalized and globalized marginalization?

Each scene of crisis in “Soil” leads to a transition where the performers are forced to move from one straw mat—from one way of knowing, being, and expressing—to another. Kethya sings the Buddhist chant she has recited since childhood, her core of stability in a sea of chaos. Nguyen employs every movement discipline trained into his body, swimming from one place to another, just as he had to at five years old with dozens of other Vietnamese refugees when their boat capsized as they approached the Malaysian coast after drifting at sea for three weeks. Waewdao holds her traditional dancer body erect and proud, maintaining a national image of mythical strength and grace under any and all circumstances.

The experience of navigating a liminal crisis state establishes a non-hierarchical frame of reference defined not by categories or binaries but rather multiplicity and dialogic behavior. Large-scale disorder and fluid boundaries nurture the ability to transcend arbitrary socialized limitations. In “Soil,” rigid, binary frames of gender become gradually reoriented. In an early scene, Nguyen’s character adopts the feral machismo of an imagined, archetypal, Vietnamese-American, hetero-male immigrant but then reveals his underlying desire to fully realize his equally imagined gay Vietnamese femininity. Emerging from a precise choreography of gendered gestural codes, he dances an improvisation—performed to the sound of air raid sirens and actual gunfire from Southeast Asian conflicts intruding on Teddy Pendergrass crooning “Don’t Leave Me This Way”—that leaves him traversing uncharted emotional territory that he must newly map in front of the audience’s eyes.



Fig. 5. Nguyen Nguyen in “Soil”, 2012 (Photos: Michael Sakamoto and JaNelle Weatherford)

Likewise, we witness Kethya reasoning her way through to the logical result of always being a “good Asian girl” when that same person is a powerful dancer capable of dancing classical roles that she is forbidden by hetero-normative rules from performing. In Cambodia, as in many cultures in South and Southeast Asia, the Monkey King, Hanuman, is considered a strictly male role. By passionately asserting her right to perform this dance in public, but doing so in a foreign country, an alternative venue, modern dress, and for only 90 seconds, Kethya also places herself into a liminal state, suspended tenuously between firm cultural traditions and her desire to manifest a diverse, dialogic self. For her, “Soil” represents who she is, has been, can be, and may never be.

In another scene, Waewdao’s character performs likewise, but from a critical stance. Since the 1970s, the “Neo-Lanna” movement of artists and cultural workers in the north, and especially in Chiang Mai, has explicitly embraced the tension between tradition and desire. Working since the 1990s as a dancer performing both living and newly reconstructed traditions of Lanna culture, Waewdao has emerged as one of the leading artists of the so-called “Lanna Renaissance.” In her solo dance in “Soil,” she positions herself squarely at the crossroads, between the weight and expectation of the dominant national culture, the liberatory empowerment of contemporary Lanna arts, and her character’s fundamental desire to express her own humanity beneath the surface images of history, privilege, and marginalization.

By performing seemingly irreconcilable conflicts between competing identities, each performer in “Soil” generates, in their own terms, the body in crisis. The dancers embody competing desires, holding them together in the same bodily time-space, thereby also manifesting a cultural commons.

Throughout “Soil,” the characters gradually accrete behavioral gestures and personality traits through reflection on their individual lives and interaction with each other. Nguyen and Kethya become more mindful of their appearances, Kethya and Waewdao gain both increased distance and intimacy with their gendered selves, and Waewdao and Nguyen stop caring so much how others perceive them. By the last scene, in which the actors perform a dance of communal identity, they have realized a methodological approach of activating and employing the cultural commons via the body in crisis. Choreographed from their combined paradoxical, self-contradictory movements, the final trio becomes a manifestation of the commons—both personal and collective—that is always already shared by all three dancers.

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Events create legacies, and while historical narratives are always contested between variably interested parties, truth is sustained through real lives. The performers in “Soil” speak their truth through their bodies, languages, and emotions. They each root their mutating presence in historical and social crises to which they are directly connected, thereby speaking to notions of sustaining civil society. They—along with butoh practitioners in general—also contribute to the potential for nurturing a larger groundswell of socially conscious performance practice, a continuum of dialogic sustainability from the microcosm of the individual to the macro-realm of the collective. My personal hope is that an artistic consciousness may arise from such endeavors that is akin to what Charles Price, Donald Nonini, and Erich Price Tree have termed “grounded utopian movements”:

By grounded we mean that the identities, values, and imaginative dimensions of utopia are culturally focused on real places, embodied by living people, informed by past lifeways, and constructed and maintained through quotidian interactions and valued

practices that connect the members of a community, even if it is a diasporic one. (2008: 128-129)

These movements' groundedness—their lived, practical relevance—gives the lie to criticism of their utopian ideals. Just as with Hijikata's implosion from capitalism, Mizu Desierto's moved conversation with permaculture, or the "Soil" dancers' transcendent potential embedded within their cultural limitations, manifesting subjective utopian desire may not always be pragmatic, but its personal and collective "truth" is its social function and—in my view—own reward.

My repeated reference in this dissertation to "become the thing itself" is a plea for what Zen Buddhists refer to as *no separation*, which underlies the concept of *anatta* (no-self), as in no individual existentially separate from all else. As Val Plumwood asserts:

As the discipline of ecology...has shown us, humans are indeed in the ecological drama, not as an audience looking on but as actors on the stage, and the great task of sustainability is desegregation, to accept our ecological identity and situate human life and settlement in ways that maintain the long-term functioning of the ecosystems we participate in. (2006: 142)

As practitioners of the contemporary body in crisis, butoh-based performers must become more conscious of this project of desegregation within their developing modes of sustainability, making it a requisite corollary of the larger project of cultivating the cultural commons:

The proposition is that activating the global commons will not just happen once we become more open to sharing a variety of different viewpoints, approaches, and experiences; it also involves being able to play with various combinations of these differences with a view to carving out innovative directions that will constructively move us forward. It is here where art can optimistically prompt us to sensitize us anew, inviting

us to reconfigure our connection to one another and other than human species without privileging one category, social function, or position over another as the agent of historical change. (Parr 2011: 11)

It was in this spirit that my director's statement for "Soil" emerged from the rehearsal process.

These are words with which I hope to warn, provoke, or inspire:

*We can only live within the means of our nature, but this holds endless potential. The body fearless in crisis must learn to sustain itself. This is the world's lesson to itself in this historical moment.*

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