A Note on Butoh Body

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Abstract

Butoh dance, the avant-garde dance originated by Tatsumi Hijikata in 1950s in Japan, is not only a performing art but also a way to explore the relationships of mind and body as in the Butoh Dance Method developed by Kasai (1998) from the viewpoint of somatic psychology. One of the key words for understanding Butoh is the Butoh body, "butoh-tai" in Japanese, meaning a physical and mental attitude so as to integrate the dichotomized elements such as consciousness vs. unconsciousness, and subject vs. object. The former is related to the multiplicity of our consciousness, and the latter to our "objectifying" mental function.

Although Butoh dance has proliferated around the world, the essence of Butoh, regardless of the Japanese or Oriental appearance of the performance, has not been fully understood also in Japan since the psychological and philosophical elements of Butoh were totally ignored. Discussions were made to clarify these points in terms of functions and the structure of consciousness.

1. At an international talk on Butoh

In the Butoh Dance Project "Ex...it! '99" [1] at Schloss Broellin, Germany, after the Butoh forum by Butoh dancers and choreographers, an international symposium on Butoh was held by inviting dance critics and philosophers from Germany, England, Italy, U.S.A., and Japan. There were significant discussions on several Butoh related topics, and one of the most problematic themes was "Butoh body."

The apparent general understanding on "Butoh body" initially was that it is the physical body in Butoh dance. However, it gave rise to a question to the author since the term Butoh body ("butoh-tai" in Japanese) has never been used in that way by Japanese Butoh dancers. It relates rather to a mental state or a state of consciousness when Butoh is performed. Another question connected with this incongruence was about the non-objectification of the body in performing Butoh. Although the term is philosophical, it forms the essential part of "Butoh-tai" in actual Butoh performance by integrating the dichotomy of the consciousness vs. unconsciousness, and also of the subject who is trying to move parts of the body vs. the moved body parts, the objectified body. The term "objectification" was introduced by one of the symposiasts, Rolf Elberfeld, a German philosopher, but the discussion concerning the term seemed to be too difficult to follow for most of the participants within the limitation of time.

Akaji Maro, one of Hijikata's disciples and the leader of Dairakudakan, often recounted that Hijikata asked him "What is a hand? What is a foot? What is walking?", and remarked that they were almost like a cryptic dialogue from a Zen master. Hijikata's books [2] are filled with polyphonic words and images with unimaginable combinations of story, which reject straight understanding and still remain enigmatic. In order to comprehend both his words and the Butoh, it is necessary to think about the creative aspect of Butoh in the first place.

2. Creative aspects of Butoh

An allegory is introduced by comparing a

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dance piece with figurative story-telling: A literal text consists of sentences, and a sentence is a set of words and phrases that are made of syllables. In dance, a simple fragment of movement could be "a syllable" of movement, while a sequence of movement would be movement "words" or "phrases" which finally make a movement "sentence."

In the most rigid dance style, a sentence of movement is completely fixed by choreographers beforehand, and what the dancers do is just to master "the sentence" as instructed, by planting each "word" and each "sentence" literally in their bodies, and reproduce them by using their bodies in front of the audience. However, it is impossible to follow the instructions perfectly because of the dancers' individual differences of physical body and mentality, and hence, each piece of performance always alters as a natural consequence although what was expressed is always with the same words, sentences, and chapters. The audience therefore enjoys the performance doubly; the authentic story of movement-chapters and the deviations in each component.

Whereas, in the most loosened case, even a movement "syllable" - a fragmental movement - would not be limited and determined, and it might include bodily reflexive distortions or tremors. As a result, the movement "words" are not always fixedly composed, and the movement "sentence" would look like a foreign language or nonsense that nobody, even the performer him/herself, does not know or cannot reproduce again. Furthermore, the syllable of movement "word" may not be a movement in the ordinary sense. Imagine an extreme case where the performer does not move at all, but, for example, tries to shift the air in the right lung to the left via his/her trachea with indiscernible bodily movements. It would not be recognized as a dance in the usual sense, but Butoh allows this type of deviation.

Perhaps we could create a new word "un-dance," meaning a deviated dance that is not performed in the ordinary sense. The expression and actual performance of "a dead man standing in desperation" in Butoh by Tatsumi Hijikata is one of the many examples, and it symbolizes the characteristics of Butoh as "un-dance."

If creativity means inventing new things that have never been done, the primary turning point in dance lies in negation of movements. When the movement "syllable," the fundamental component of dance, ceases to be a physical movement, there appears brand-new bodily activities that hardly can be categorized as a dance. The author believes that Hijikata initiated one of these "un-dances." When he was asked the reason why he stopped dancing and devoted himself to choreographing his disciples after the success of his Butoh dance, he answered that he had been dancing, but nobody noticed it.

If the value of dance lies in being seen by others, the negation of being seen also starts another "un-dance." There are two types of "un-seen dance": 1) When there is no audience who sees the performer, and 2) when the movements are not explicit to the outside, but are internal or mental. [3]

The air shifting between the right-left lung is an example of the latter, and also the covert or visceral behavior that stem from mental situations also fall into the latter category. Emotions are not a mental phenomenon, but a mental - physical concurrence with visible or invisible reflections in the body. A convulsion or a tic is visible and apparent, but such gross reactions are resultant phenomena coming from indiscernible minute tremors that are induced by mental or physical stimulation. (It is often difficult to tell visually whether the person's body is tense or not. Touching is the way of catching the minor muscle tension or minute reactions as Alexander Technique teachers do.)

The reason the Butoh Dance Method (Kasai, 1998) [4] has much to do with psychosomatic exploration becomes clear here: Butoh dance at this level is unrelated to fixed choreographed movements, and gives performers opportunities to become aware of what is going on inside of themselves mentally and physically. This directivity is quite the reverse of ordinary dance where the performer's first concern would be how to show off the predetermined movements.

Since novel or strange movements that have never imagined in the ordinary dance are not rejected in Butoh dance, it appears that Butoh contains total freedom or deviation for creativity at three levels: a) syllable level - a movement fragment, the minimum unit, is not limited to physically apparent movements, b) word level - a movement "word" does not necessary have an expression or a message or is not a series of

movements, c) sentence level - the story of the performance is not necessarily accompanied or given consciously by the performer him/herself.

Butoh performers who find that they are free without the various restrictions of ordinary dance styles would be pleased with this freedom at first, but soon will find that the performer him/herself is the primary limitation and the limiting factor in the dance. Everybody has his/her own physical limitations and vulnerable mind that has undergone all kinds of personal and cultural histories. Hence, every Butoh dancer is different to the next one and a wide variety of performance style naturally results. When they perform, they inevitably have to expose their inner selves, their own lives, bodies and minds that are unique and limited culturally, rather than representing a choreographed story or scenario as in conventional dance.

3. The cross-cultural aspect of Butoh

A necessity arises here concerning precise terminology classifying Butoh for further discussion on cultural differences. In this paper, "the original Butoh" means Butoh performances that were danced or choreographed by Hijikata. "Classical Butoh" consists of the Butoh performances danced by Hijikata's disciples, the second or the third generation of Butoh performed mainly by Butoh dancers with Japanese cultural backgrounds. "Butoh" with no above modifiers covers every Butoh performance, regardless of cultural matters or lineage from Hijikata.

Since Hijikata started Ankoku Butoh in the late 1950s, Butoh has proliferated in many countries with their own cultural and physical backgrounds, although the original and classical Butoh started with dense Japanese physical and cultural elements that are usually considered essential in Butoh performance. However, if Butoh were a culturally bound dance form performed only by Japanese dancers, it would have remained an exotic Oriental dance and would never have influenced modern or contemporary dancers in the West. Oriental exoticism might have been welcomed at first when Butoh was imported by foreign countries, but the essence or spirit of Butoh must have played a major role in its proliferation in the Western dance world.

The reason the first "Ex...it!" Butoh dance project (1995) in Germany dismissed Japanese Butoh dancers seems to be that the western performers were trying to materialize their own westernized or internationalized Butoh. This instance shows that there had and has been a dispute regarding the definition of Butoh. It must have been decisively important for them whether what they did was related to the spirit of Butoh or not, partly because a small number of Japanese Butoh dancers or critics deny the western dancers' ability to dance Butoh due to their physical, mental and cultural gaps.

Westernized Butoh can never be the original or classical Butoh because of definition. However, if those three types of deviations toward "un-dance" are the hallmark of Butoh, it is clear that the westernized "Butoh" has already developed into a subcategory of Japanese Butoh to some extent, since it struggles to overcome the boundaries of ordinary Western dance forms as if they replicated what Hijikata accomplished in Japan, destroying the conventions of Japanese and Western dances, and originated his own "un-dance," Butoh.

There are many self-styled Butoh dancers in the world, with no Japanese cultural backgrounds, and also many Japanese Butoh dancers with no connection to Hijikata or his disciples. However, if they understand and try to actualize the essential elements of Butoh discussed here, their performance must be categorized as one of Butoh style. Hence, each performance would fall somewhere between two distinct poles in Butoh: 1) essential Butoh performance with no or few Japanese cultural elements, or 2) replication of original or classical Butoh with no or little endeavor to deconstruct them.

Japanese critics of Butoh might say that most foreign performers cannot be able to reproduce traditional Butoh because they are lacking in Japanese physical characteristics such as bowleg "ganimata" as well as Japanese cultural backgrounds toward the mind-body entity. However, after more than 30 years has passed since Butoh was originated, the tendency toward the essence of Butoh has become much more of significant value for foreign performers as well as Japanese Butoh dancers, with no remnant of the traditional Butoh, rather than the replication of original or classic Butoh performances. [5]

In the long run, the westernized version of Butoh would lose all the fragrance of the original or classical Butoh, and it would not be called "Butoh" but something like "hyper dance." However,

Japanese Butoh will never turn into "hyper dance" completely because of its Orientalism in the deepest sense described in the following.

4. Physical and mental attitude

Butoh body is a literal translation of Japanese "butoh-tai," but the major meaning of "tai" in Butoh is not the physical body, but a state of mind or attitude. It is usually understood as a mental-physical attitude by Japanese Butoh performers. We are a physical-mental entity and both aspects of ourselves are deeply interconnected. A simple topic describing this relationship would be a question such as this: When we are injured, which is in pain; the body or the mind? An elegant answer would be "I am in pain," which means that neither the physical body nor the mind alone is painful, but both simultaneously.

If the essential Butoh is an "un-dance" with no choreography as described above, the way how the performer starts dancing becomes a major concern, and it makes the key to the concept of "butoh-tai." How to break fixed sequences of movement, and the themes of deconstruction as described above (a, b, c) must be taken into consideration as in the Alexander Technique where the technique of breaking a set of bad movements or postures is the main concern. [6]

Another nonce word "the body set," compared to the term "the mind set," would be suitable here. Since the mind being set as it is means that his/her body is set as such internally at the same time without major visible changes. While performing Butoh, the mind-body set plays a role of framework of movements and prepares the mental-physical space for un-predetermined things to come in. "Butoh-tai" comprises this mental-physical attitude towards him/herself and also towards the field or the environment in which the performer exists. There are four basic categories of the mind-body set concerning movements: 1) the subject starts movements, 2) the environment and/or internal mechanisms starts the person's movements, 3) both the subject and the environment/ internal mechanisms co-operate and start movements, 4) the self and the environment and the movements are not separated. The third category would show self congruence of the dancing person, and the fourth would be a state of mystic conjunction or non-objectification, transcending the dichotomized relationship of the controller and the controlled.

5. The multiplicity of consciousness

Since William James [7] wrote about the multiplicity of our consciousness, the contrast between consciousness and unconsciousness, the term "discrete altered states of consciousness" [8], the idea of "hidden observer" in hypnotic dissociation [9], multiple personality or dissociative identity disorders [10], and other similar concepts have been proposed by researchers of various psychological fields. State bound memory would be a simple experimental example for their verification: Memories are best retrieved if the situation is the same as when it was memorized. This fact implies that each mental state is discrete and independent from the next one in terms of memory storage and retrieval, and gives clues about the multiplicity of our internal world.

Also, the originator of phenomenological sociology, Alfred Schutz, proposed a theory of multiple reality where we keep leaping amongst many "provinces of finite meaning." [11] Each province is a subset of our social identity with a social role that is taken by the person successively, and it constructs and actualizes our reality sequentially.

Although the conscious "I" constructs "the paramount reality" which is the seemingly most realistic world to the conscious self, the combination of consciousness and sub/unconsciousness make a parallel process where multiple layers construct each reality that could be equivalent to one another as "a real reality." Cases of multiple personality, dissociative personality disorders, have shown ample examples of the equivalency of each stratum of dissociated conscious ego and its reality.

Consciousness is compared to the syntagmatic relation of language. A sentence is a linear disposition of words and consciousness is also a linear series of experiences. Also, before each word is selected and fixed in a sentence, there would have been possibilities of another word for each word. This paradigmatic relation [12] of each component with another substitutional word is normally latent and not materialized in the sentence. In consciousness, one of the parallel layers of our multiple structure of (un/sub) consciousness could

have been experienced by the person by chance, but the very layer had been selected and became the life of the person. The paradigmatic structure of our consciousness is not only a linguistic metaphor but also a real switching mechanism of the foreground and background of the consciousness as in our verbal activities. This is related to the attention shift that makes the basis of the Ericksonian system of hypnosis induction [13] where a subject is hypnotized naturally by skillful manipulation of attention.

A simple conscious dictation to the body cannot become the way to integrate the parallel consciousness system as a whole. Openness to every layer of our physical-mental entity is the only way to integration, and is related to the metal state called "Butoh-tai."

6. The objectifying function of consciousness

Objectification comes from the directivity of our consciousness that is always a consciousness of an attended object. Objectification automatically introduces the dichotomy of the objectified target and the objectifying subject, and it shows itself as a ruling structure where the body is utilized only as a tool by the subject. This situation has been compared with horse back riding: the rider and horse is an old analogy of dichotomy of the controller and controlled.

Although it looks like an absolute truth for the conscious ego, the relationship of the self and the body is not so simple and fixed. The ideomotor phenomenon is a good example: A pendulum held by a hand begins to swing gradually by the holder merely having the thought that it should start moving without an intentional motion to move it. It has been known by neurological physiologists that having a thought about the movement of a body part elicits motor nervous firings and actually starts the movement a little, at least, without a conscious decision to move it. In the Alexander Technique, automatic and habitual bodily responses are the main target to be checked whether they invite ineffective movements or bad postures.

Since this objectification is a basic function of our consciousness, attempts to cease or transcend this function have been carried out in various fields including religion and mysticism: Yogis tried to "stop the function of the consciousness," Sufis tried

to unify with God through non-objectification with it, Zen Buddhism rejected objectification and verbalization in its essential requirement, and philosophy was prolific in this issue such as the phenomenological approach by Edmund Husserl or Kitaro Nishida's "pure-experience" [14], for example.

The following are enumerated keywords and short explanations of Butoh (with some editorial changes) by Dr. Rolf Elberfeld [15], a German Philosopher specializing in phenomenology, Japanology, Sinology and the History of Religion. (The words in parentheses are corresponding Japanese terms.)

-1. Pure experience (junsui keiken): Nishida shows in his book "Zen no kenkyu" that the most fundamental way of experience is the non-objectifying "pure-experience" from which the individual as individual will be born. The process of pure-experience is the movement of reality itself.

-2. Place (basho): In Butoh dance, not the dancer as subject is dancing, the place itself is dancing and the dancer will be created by the place in which he is dancing.

-3. "Inbetween-ness" (aida): In Butoh dance, in Dr. Elberfled's opinion, the "inbetween-ness" shows the movement and the body as a transient being.

-4. Resonance ("o" of "rinki-ohen"): The manner in which the place as nature and surroundings and the dancer is connected is a mutual resonance from which every will gets its meaning.

-5. Self-so-ing (jinen): The quality of the movement that occurs from the above mentioned phenomena is the quality of "jinen" which means that everything is, in a non-objectified way, out of itself whatever it is (sono mama).

-6. LifeDeath (shoji): In Butoh dance, every moment is the appearance of life and death. Life and death are not two different things. They will appear as one if the dancer realizes the origin of the movement itself.

The author used the term "essence of Butoh" several times without clear descriptions. The keywords by Elberfeld above are full of insights about what "the essence" means, but detailed explanations of the keywords are unfortunately beyond the coverage of this article. Possible comments on them would be that 1) they historically derive from Oriental and Japanese

cultures, 2) they integrate the objectifying and the objectified, 3) Butoh dance densely contains these elements and invites these factors in the performer's mind-body as well as in the audiences,' 4) although their appearance is Oriental, they are fundamentally universal and cross-cultural.

7. Butoh body and non-objectification

Body objectification means that consciousness directs and the body becomes something to be controlled and moved by volition. Not using mirrors in training is one of the examples of non-objectification in vision. Although after removing mirrors, people tend to remain in a state of visualization of his/her body for a while, they gradually begin to perceive a proprioceptive sensation, the internal physical sense. This perception is far from the visualized one and the objectified comprehension of the body. At this point, Noguchi Taiso (physical exercise) presents itself as a way of non-objectification for psycosomatic exploration described in Kasai's paper [4] because it rejects the visualized comprehension of the body.

A working definition of "Butoh-tai" is a mental state trying to avoid objectifying the body and staying with the awareness of mind-body. The keywords above are its components, and therefore, "butoh-tai" may take a similar attitude as seen in religious training or ascetic practices in order to reach a mystic state of being. There are legends of fasting in Butoh as Buhdda did for spiritual enlightenment: Hijikata ordered a disciple to survive by eating only one apple per day for six months; Sankaijuku in the early days, and also some other troupes, stopped eating several days before performance. It might serve a reasonable function to loose unnecessary weight, but it often extends to an irrational degree as dancers cannot move.

Such a physically extreme state as fasting or severe training loosens the reins of consciousness, and can invite the fusion of the objectified and the objectifying self in an altered state of consciousness, if it is successful. Since it is well known that physically extreme states can induce a hypnotic state, a trance or a dissociation of consciousness in the positive sense is presumably at the core of "butoh-tai."

Semimaru, a member of Sankaijuku, once said that there are at least three selves when he is performing: The dancing self that is watching and objectifying the body, a second self that is seen by the audience, and a third self that is watching from above both the dancing self and the stage. There are reciprocal relationships of the objectifying self and the objectified self in his experience. Although the realization of the three selves turns into self-objectification at that very instant, it is a good example of self dissociation in performance. Actor's self dissociation for role-taking is well known, but there would be a different factor or two in Butoh because of rejection of verbalization. If the movements or the whole performance are well articulated verbally by the performer or the audience, it cannot be Butoh since there must have never been a dissociation of the self: Retrieval of the memory of the performance should be difficult if there is dissociation - an example of a state-specific memory or natural amnesia, and it is difficult to explain what the performance was like and also to find pertinent wording to describe the performance, if it was performed and seen by the audience in a dissociative state of mind.

In the most ideal and "essential" Butoh performance, what the audience sees is not the performer's body but a non-materialized world as if the performer's body becomes a prism and allows the audience to see something latent behind the performer. What the performer experienced during the performance is like a dream during the night, and he/she gradually notices afterwards that there is spiritual calmness in the depth of his/her heart without clearly knowing why. It is an evidence of a return from pilgrimage through the dissociated parts of the self, and a recovery or creation of his/her own wholeness.

References

[1] Toshiharu Kasai/ Itto Morita "2nd International Butoh Dance Project Ex...it!'99 - Forum and Symposium   Reports," in press, 1999

[2] Tatsumi Hijikata "Yameru Maihime (A Sick Dancing Princess)" 1983,

                "Biboh no Aozora (The Blue Sky of Beauty)" 1987 (Both are written in Japanese.)

[3] The author defined in [4] that Butoh dance performed with no audience is Level -1 Butoh dance.

Rolf Elberfeld used the term "a hidden dance/performance" in the symposium.

[4] Toshiharu Kasai "A Butoh Dance Method for Psychosomatic Exploration" Memoirs of Hokkaido Institute of Technology, vol.27, 309-316, 1999
(This paper is available at http://www.ne.jp/asahi/butoh/itto/)

[5] Akiko Motofuji, Hijikata's wife and co-founder of Butoh with him, was very much critical about a general tendency for foreign students, who attended her Butoh lessons several times and learned some traditional Butoh-like movements and postures, started calling him/herself a Butoh dancer.

[6] Wilfred Barlow "The Alexander Technique" 1973

[7] William James "The Principles of Psychology," vol.2, 1890

[8] Charles Tart "Altered States of Consciousness" 1969

[9] Earnest R. Hilgard "Divided Consciousness" 1977

[10] Multiple personality disorder has been admitted as one of the mental disorders listed in DSM-III (1980)
     by American Psychiatric Association.

[11] Alfred Schutz "The Problems of Social Reality, Collected Papers - I" 1962

[12] Ferdinand de Saussure "Cours de linguistique generale" 1916
     (Japanese translation by Hideo Kobayashi, 1940)

[13] "A Teaching seminar with Milton E. Erickson," Edited by Jeffrey K. Zeig, 1980

[14] Kitaro Nishida "Zen no kenkyuu" 1911

[15] Personal communication with Dr. Rolf Elberfeld (Philosophische Fakultat, Universitat Wuppertal, Germany) , 1999