

Butoh Memorandums 2013 by Itto Morita

(Feb.4. Updated Feb.7, 2013)

The status quo of Noguchi Taiso gymnastics (2)

I learned Noguchi taiso for the first time when I attended an intensive Butoh workshop run by Semimaru, one of the original Sankaijuku members, 25 years ago. He showed us how to do several Noguchi taiso exercises and movements, but he did not emphasize much about the origin. All we heard was that they learned Noguchi taiso when Noguchi taught at a polytechnic or elsewhere in Tokyo, etc.

Because the contents of Semimaru's Butoh workshop were very much influenced by Noguchi taiso, one of participants asked him whether Noguchi taiso was the most important element in Butoh. Semimaru replied to him, saying "No". He utilized the elements of Noguchi taiso a lot, but he rather emphasized that "omoi" (thought, sentiment, etc. that is held in the mind) is most important for Butoh.

I visited Noguchi taiso class several times in Tokyo. But, I was not so much impressed by the movements they were doing. (I saw Noguchi a couple of times, but did not have a direct contact with him). Maybe, It was because I had experienced most of them from one of the distinguished Butoh dancers of Sankaijuku, who had showed us his high competence of controlling his body-mind whether it is Noguchi taiso or not. I had been moved by Noguchi's revolutionary ideas about the body and body movements, but I think that I was much more attracted at that time by the state of the body-mind, or of the embodied mind or of the body that reflects the unconscious.

When I was checking Butoh video materials of 1980s, the boss of Sankaijuku, Ushio Amagatsu, explained about his butoh lessons and how to use the body when performing butoh. Almost all of his explanations seemed to be related to the ideas of Noguchi taiso, but he never mentioned to the name of Noguchi. I had a strange feeling about it. Several years after that, I found that Noguchi taiso people, his disciples or students, tried to save and preserve the original forms or ways to do Noguchi taiso. But, Butoh dancers are eager to find out his/her own way to perform Butoh: Noguchi taiso is very important, but it remains only a part of Butoh practices for Butoh performance.

* Noguchi himself said, late in life, that everybody should do or create his/her own taiso.

Butoh is not a physical exercise or gymnastics. It is one of performing arts, and you need to explore and deepen your own body-mind for performance. If Butoh performance is confined in the physical gymnastics, it would be self-destructive as a Butoh dancer. Then, where should we place Noguchi taiso in Butoh ? What element of Noguchi taiso is most important ?

Noguchi taiso elements for Butoh dance

In 1999's paper "A Butoh Dance Method for Psychosomatic Exploration", I wrote about Noguchi taiso for Butoh dance training. (available at [butoh papers]) It has been one of major English descriptions to me on Noguchi taiso for Butoh training. The followings are some extracted points from it:

1) Significance of the weight of the body: "Listen to the god of weight".

Muscles are the ears for listening to the words of God -Gravity.

2) "Noguchi taiso does not restrict movement patterns, nor give a name to the movement according to the bodily shape, nor determine the purpose or aim of the movements in advance".

3) Arm relaxation lesson and body-untying lesson for relaxation is very important in terms of Noguchi taiso..

4) Nenyoro (body-untying) lesson is also significant to learn that the body is not a muscle-skeletal hard entity but a kind of a water bag in which bones, muscles, and viscera are all floating.

* The word "ne-nyoro" comes from a mimetic expression "nyoro nyoro" describing the snakey movement of a snake. "Ne" means "lying" in this word.

I and Mika Takeuchi, my partner of Butoh GooSayTen, created several new exercises based on the ideas of Noguchi taiso. The arm-standing exercise is one of them, and was found very effective to induce the body-mind relaxation not only in Butoh training but also in psychosomatic approach at mental clinics.

* Check my presentation at [ECArTE conference]

We thought that the arm-standing exercise should be regarded to be one of Noguchi taiso exercise, but soon realized that this exercise aims not only at the body but also at both of the body and mind, including a different state of body-mind, or an altered state of consciousness. Noguchi taiso is a body approach; Butoh dance is a performing art using the body and the unconscious mind; Our Butoh dance method has been developing based on them, and proceeding to a psychosomatic approach by integrating the body approach, performing art, and the body-mind psychotherapeutic approach. (Both of us became a certified dance therapist of Japan Dance Therapy Association, but it is really subsidiary as Butoh dancers.)

I had not written a lot about Noguchi taiso for many years because there are many other significant things occurring around the theme of the body-mind, such as mirror neuron, systems approach, system perturbation or decoupling of the body system and the mind system, etc.

But, I am now looking back to Noguchi taiso and am writing again about it especially for Butoh dance and for people who are eager to learn more about it. One thing should be added here: I am reluctant to use the name Noguchi taiso these days, because most of our exercises are not original ones, but developed for Butoh dance.

The followings are some of our important points in Butoh lesson, that are influenced by the ideas of Michizo Noguchi;

- a) Passive or resultant movements should be induced in Butoh, and we should be aware of them.
- b) Our intention or plan to move is only a starting point of movement, and what actually happens may be something different from what we thought, and it is the right track for Butoh.
- c) In these situations, we are thrown away from a cradle of self-satisfaction to an uneasy situation as a stranger in terms of the state of the body-mind.
- d) We need to struggle seriously to survive in these situations as Tatsumi Hijikata said that Butoh is like a dead man keeping standing desperately.
- e) And, the ne-nyoro (body-untying) lesson in Noguchi taiso would be one of the good starting points for authentic Butoh of passiveness.
- d) Agonies that are arising from the gap between our intentions and passiveness (or one's own fate) lies in the core of the authentic Butoh.

I believe that the nenyoro exercise in Noguchi taiso, for example, allows us to enter another aspect of the body-mind. And, it has been a good entrance to the authentic Butoh.

(Itto Morita: Feb.4, 2013)

* As to Noguchi's "Man as a primordial form of life" 1972, I am making a summary of the table of contents with brief explanations. It will take some time before uploading.