

Butoh

Revolt of the Flesh in Japan and a Surrealist Way to Move

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Being compelled to apply for dance license in locals is only an evident example of our living in a country, a civilization, where a dance ban prevails. Few are, even, the movements, gestures and bodily expressions driven by feelings which don't get obscured by a social or practical function; which let us keep and expand the body's own desire for truth, and for an unveiling of the excusing or judging eye of the mass, which functions as prison and guard.

Behind the clothes, every part of the skin is waiting to show us its hidden face, every muscle to get eyes and reach towards the surrounding air, follow the wind and the light - and the darkness. The fear of dirt is a punishment for the body's desire to be touched, to travel, to discover and to swim.

Upbringing to normal life has stayed every bodypart to not be bent to any other task than practical ones: stand, sit, lay down. We know our body nowadays only to those parts that correspond to our clothes worn over them. The parts separated from each other, and from other bodies.

Step by step, every petrification must get to scream out its history, the yoke must be aborted, a new upbringing must be more thorough than upbringing: what do we remember from our lives as *unborn*, how do we understand the earth, which are the animals that have passed through us on our way of becoming humans, who are the dead that have left their long lives to give them to us? The man of prehistory reappears to attack the imprudence of today and to teach us that which we have repressed.

In the exploration of the path towards future feelings we must be liberated from the present adjusted personality and try all the banned movements of the body: violence, sexual perversion. Why? Because a reunification and a rebirth of body and spirit implies a position standing by itself in relation to the allowable, the normal, and their supposed opposites - and an open breach with every shoe, hard or soft, that in our personal history have meant to kick us towards the middle.

A performance of the butoh company Sankai-juku convulsed me in its powerful reminder of the irreconcilable principles of the body, my body, its desire for liberation from its chains. The clothes I'm wearing, the distances I have to travel, the gestures I have to present, everything has to be thrown over to give way for the dance of life itself, the one I must have had when I was born and did not experience any limit between myself and the universe. All these years without the dance of life - so much to regain, so many recurring low bows that demand revenge, these demands now got a name:

butoh. But the experience had no words - until I later was lucky enough to receive them in Swedish! - Susanna Åkerlund, student of Yoko Ashikawa in Tokyo, visited Sweden. In her performance *Twilight Play* on the *Moderna Dansteatern*, her body seemed to become a naked medium for the big and small earthquakes that run through every nerve and muscle, as if they were beings who usually keep silent. She talked to my body. What she showed and told me was a parallel to what I had earlier experienced through free improvisation in music: an *over-personal* state which plays my body. She gave me guidance and we got, together with Christian Werner and Daniel Scott, the chance to explore in practice the connections between butoh, surrealism and improvised music. In this article, therefore, I give her the last word.

Dance (and music) are utterly fragmentary in the history of the surrealist movement. **Antonin Artaud's** texts about theatre, Balinese theatre and Indian peyote-dances in many ways forebode the view that butoh has. His homage to the Balinese theatre (1931) could in many aspects very well have concerned a butoh performance. The following quotations are only a few of the ones who could have been chosen: "Every creation in this theatre stems from the scene, finds its expression and its very origins in a secret psychic impulse which is the Word before the words. (...) what we in Western theatre jargon call the director (...) becomes a kind of magic plan-maker, a master of ceremonies within the holy trade. And the stuff he is working with, the subjects that he gives life to are not his but the ones of the gods. They seem to originate from primitive alliances in Nature that a double Spirit has promoted. That which he sets in motion is the REVEALED. It is a kind of primitive Physics which the Spirit never has rid itself of. (...) The reflected effects which consistently run from colour to gesture and from scream to motion incessantly leads us to roads that are steep and difficult for the thought and throws us out into the state of insecurity and undescribable anguish which distinguishes poetry. From the peculiar play of hands that fly around like insects in a green dusk, a sort of frightening obsession appears, an incessant mental nagging, as when a spirit is constantly busy with orienting itself in the labyrinths of its unconscious. (...) I don't know of a theatre which in this way and *as something natural* would dare nailing the anguish that fills up a soul abandoned to the phantoms from the other side of the grave."

Héélène Vanel was called, when she danced on the *International Surrealist Exhibition* 1938, "The Iris of Mists, the first authentic surrealist dancer." Only very few photographs and very poor information remains on her. Her only known text contains the following statement, among others, which has elements similar to butoh: "Dance, joyous and powerful expression of the enthusiasm for life, must have the same mission as poetry. It creates forms in Time and Space. Dance is the vertigo of matter. To communicate with life's forces by means of gesture and movement - the simplest and most direct expression. To rediscover the truth of being. To acquire, at the same time, the sense of the *invisible powers* that attract us even while repelling us: is this not a means of surpassing ourselves, a way out of the marasmus and mediocrity - a method of attaining the *grandeur* that we so shamefully abandoned?"

In the USA, the dancers **Sybil Shearer**, **Alice Farley** and **Debra Taub** have expressed themselves as surrealists, and Franklin Rosemont has edited selected texts of **Isadora Duncan** and described her work in surrealist terms. Farley writes in the 70's: "The highest demand made on dance is to be a medium of expressive transformations, a form of "theater" which is not merely theatrical. (...) I would like only to see a performance as interesting as my dreams; to know that it is a matter of life and death and musical cyclones. (...) I would like to see the life of the dance, and all theater, be the

alchemy of its transitions, where the desire that binds seemingly incongruous forms is the spark that illuminates a kinesthetic knowledge - to see those moments of transmutation where up turns down and fire becomes water, where opposites meet in an impossible space. And through these moments action can inform thought - and body the mind. (...) The image must be used to reveal the latent content of all that man is and is becoming. Dance in Western culture, if it is truly to exist at all, must become a theater of living transformation and revolution."

But none of the mentioned has as consequently as butoh developed a surrealist work with the body and the spirit, and developed the dancer all the way from its most primitive state as corpse, stone and air to a "skin cosmos" (Tomoe Shizune) with endless possibilities.

The Dance of Darkness (Ankoku Butoh) was developed from the end of the 50's primarily by **Tatsumi Hijikata** (1928 - 1986) in and against a reactionary Japan under American occupation. The traditional Japanese conservative culture and the new forced-upon Western one, born a chaotic vacuum in the sense of identity, out of which a total revolt against everything came. The attitudes of butoh were consequently grown up in a situation similar to that of surrealism, after World War I, and even many of their literary sources of inspiration are the same: Artaud, Lautréamont, Sade: butoh approved the Artaudian theory of the theatre and Hijikata and Min Tanaka used Artaud's recording of his "Pour en finir avec le jugement de Dieu" (To Have Done With The Judgement Of God); Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno made a performance after Lautréamont's "Maldoror".

Japanese culture, before butoh, had no tradition-breaking dance of its own. Old stylized dances for experts and closed classes of society existed parallelly with the Western dances. Hijikata sought in many dance idioms before developing his own: from modern Western dance to salon dance and flamenco. In flamenco, there is a closeness to the ground which has parallels in southern India as well as in the motion pattern of the Japanese farmer. The word butoh, which means "dance-step", has the air of a descending, stomping dance. "I would never jump or leave the ground; it is on the ground that I dance." (Hijikata)

From the West, butoh seems to be a marked Eastern phenomenon. Many characters of butoh remind of that its birthplace could never have been Europe or the Christian world. But features of Japanese religions and ways of thinking only serve as detours on the way to concepts that precede them and other conservative or superficial ideologies. Sometimes it is felt, against the Japanese conservatism, as liberating to take influences from the West. Susanna Åkerlund was surprised by such lunges as Tomoe Shizune's, "Who hasn't seen Batman can't dance butoh!" - he then made, after the American film, a butoh performance called "Batman". The music in butoh performances can also be Western, with the thought that anything must go, from punk to classical music.

Hijikata said, "There is no philosophy before Butoh. It is only possible that a philosophy may come out of Butoh." In a similar way, surrealist theory comes out of its poetical practice, and from the desire for a decisive change in life. Like "pure psychic automatism" in surrealism is a force beyond talent and image of personality, butoh dancers say that one must "become a receptacle." (Min Tanaka) Like surrealist musicians have said that "the music plays the musician" (Davey Williams), butoh dancers say they "are danced." (Susanna Åkerlund) To make visible the desires of the body; to draw the powers in the concrete irrationality of the spirit and the body, in the unconscious, in thoughts, memories and pains repressed by taboos; to create in an objective state where inspiration and improvisation guide and the obscuring affect of the private consciousness and prestige are

opposed; all this are part of the practice of butoh - as well as that of surrealism. Butoh, like the surrealist creativity, resembles a state of trance, where the human being experiences itself as a medium for powers greater than its own consciousness.

As objective powers and as attitudes, I see surrealism as part of butoh and I see butoh as part of surrealism.

"I decided never to dance without feeling. I realized that the feeling was outside my body, and I thought I might be able to get the feeling into my body. At the time, people talked about dance coming from the inside, but I thought the dance had to come from outside and meet inside", Min Tanaka says, and tells us how Hijikata worked with him: "He used about a thousand images from nature applied throughout the body, and I had to remember every one. Each day he changed the order of the movements. The images were of such elements as wind or sunshine, and he used them not to provide form, but to provide the inspiration. The movements were natural. (...) No personality was involved in the choreography." Yoko Ashikawa's daily routine with Hijikata used to begin with him beating a small drum and uttering a stream of words like poetry. In a similar way, he instructed Natsuyuki Nakanishi about how to design a poster: "Thistle, okay? thistle, hunting dog, the translator of the wind, the first flower, the burning dog's tooth, saddle. That's the cover for a horse's back. Okay? And also this, Nakanishi; it's not an edible image: an ordinary meal. And 17 years. When I say seventeen years, do you think I'm crazy? A stone thrown through the glass sign of a reanimation hospital. Are you taking note of this? Also frog.' When he asked me if frogs were toys to be dissected, I said yes. Then he continued, 'tooth, and Korean whistle, sulphur, worms, laughter, boiling, the sphere of love. - The sphere of love? What's that? It's a woman's womb. Korean volubis, that's a poisonous plant', he said. 'Dreaming potion, comb, greenhouse, shelled insect, that's a ladybug.' Then Hijikata added, 'Make a poster with these words. Before creating his butoh dance, he asked me to note down his first images in the form of words."

Hijikata's words were not meant to be applied as pantomime or symbolism, they could only be incarnated if the body was first emptied of personal claims: "I saw that existence itself is full of shame. In the face of this shame, I couldn't make even one finger move. It was not a matter of whether I could dance or not. After struggling, I noticed that there was no other way but self-abandonment. At last, I noticed and found where my body was, after I felt the shame of my existence. Therefore, we need a remedy to let our existence become shameful, and the remedy itself is words, existence is driven by words. When the words don't move, the self-abandonment begins. The word reaches its peak in the condition of self-abandonment. In this condition, the word is embodied little by little. In this phenomenon, the sub-conscious will also create." (Yoko Ashikawa)

Butoh reaches the unconscious by peeling off the superfluous Ego, which blocks the view. "I have always danced in a manner where I grope within myself for the roots of suffering by tearing at the superficial harmony." (Hijikata) "Something is hiding in our subconscious, collected in our subconscious body, which will appear in each detail of our expression. Here, we can rediscover time with an elasticity, sent by the dead. We can find Butoh in the same way we can touch our hidden reality. Something can be born, can appear, living and dying in a moment." (Hijikata)

Death, as butoh dancers continuously talk about it, must be understood as a necessary weeding out of superficiality, egotism and society responsibility, and as the blank page that poetry and love can write on. "What could be the life of that which is dead?", Kazuo Ohno says to his pupils, who will

become like "the creator of the world, he who has no identity, he who existed before the appearance of the individual. Then, all is but a game." The receptacle of the body shall be emptied of its musty waters to be filled with non-alienated life: "You have to kill your body to construct a body as a larger fiction. And you can be free at that moment." (Akaji Maro) "The thought is that the body gets support and help from something entirely different ... something which it is impossible to find with language. The body consequently gets support from something that lives inside of it. One such thing is that which in Japanese has the name *ma*, i.e. interspace. What, then, does such a *ma* try to say or do? Well, these *ma* e.g. make gods or other beings work." (Akaji Maro) "The being within the total void allows the body to discover the new strings that will move it." (Mitsutaka Ishii) The darkness, the void and death are not meant for meditation, they are created without the conscious will having to lead this creation; as food for inner voices and images: "The movements of the dog next door and such are like so many broken boats, drifting inside me in bits and pieces. From time to time, however, these boats gather, speak, and consume the darkness - the most valuable food source inside my body. And sometimes their body and hand gestures that collect within me get attached to my hands, and surface. When I want to hold an object, one hand reaches out, but the other hand tries to hold it back ... one hand chases the other." (Hijikata) Butoh's exploration of the body bears in mind the inner contradictions of the body of every human being: between light and darkness, and between life and death. It is ultimate contradictions of this kind that create movement: no life without death, no creation without destruction.

It is impossible, when talking about butoh, to separate body and spirit from each other. The "technique" of butoh is secondary to the clearness that the spirit demands. All possible images are used as canals toward an expansion of the body to the outer world. The image never seems to stand still, it always contains a contradiction, a movement, a crisis - as reality, or truth, does. Hijikata wanted to "depict the human posture in crisis, exactly as it is." This crisis is the shadow image of the ideological crisis that the society has - the crisis that butoh represents, shows the weakness and needs of the human life - and since the hidden, "ugly", put under taboo and ashamed aspects are given high priority it is a revealing dance. Butoh reveals the repression and hypocritical life of the body - but its enormous, hidden possibilities as well.

Sometimes the image is simply the naked presence in the room in which the dancer exists. Every room in itself contains a hidden crisis, which the dancer can become a medium for. Min Tanaka used to improvise his dances naked, outdoors, (which led to that he got into jail, but even there, he tried to go on). His objective was to express the subconscious of his muscles, the memory of his cells. He has said, "I don't dance in the place, but I am the place." Tanaka has cooperated with the American pianist Cecil Taylor. The correspondences between the attitudes of the two are striking. Taylor, with emphasis on improvisation in a state of trance, tries "to imitate on the piano the leaps in space that a dancer takes" and also says his music expresses "every muscle of the body in harmonious discord," has, except for certain contacts with American surrealists, apparent similarities in attitude with surrealism (I will return to this issue some other time), and his statements are also very close to Tanakas, who says: "The speed of thought, of nerves, of blood circulation, of muscular tissues, of the spirit; the chaotic coexistence of various speeds made me excited and alert."

Butoh is an art in the service of the revolution, as well as an hermetic research - in the service of truth. Regarding the distinction "between the fighters and the pleasure seekers in this life", Hijikata said, "They are mistaken in thinking that hurling bombs or turning away makes them diametrically

opposed. One should do both!" Like surrealism, butoh has an exoteric aspect together with an esoteric one; the essence of the dance is human, but are outside of the functions of the society and beyond the stage appearances. Its "artistic" surface has the motive of reaching a certain amount of people and make these general truths apparent for them. In the performances there is also a wish to change every-day life, to abolish or transcend the artistic as well as every-day rituals, for a life and a body in truth and closeness to nature and to itself. Natsu Nakajima says, "It is not art that I aspire to, but love." And Mitsutaka Ishii considers dance to be an act, not a performance. He uses dance improvisation as a "guerilla technique", and among other things does dance therapy experiments in psychiatric hospitals. Tanaka has worked with dance therapy with handicapped. Hijikata said, "a dance made to be shown, is of no interest." "A performance has both beginning and end ... common sense. But a circle, drawn with a compass, has starting and ending points, which disappear when the circle takes life", Ushio Amagatsu says, and in an interview: "The origins of that which is happening on stage are from the mountains and the sandy beaches. People are drawn to the theatre today precisely in the same way as one in former times went to special places in nature to experience certain feelings. Every one in the audience comes from different environments and have different feelings within themselves when they sit down in the theatre. I want them to come in harmony with the performance and go back to the original within themselves."

The desire for originality, the exploration of paths towards it, and the attention paid to obstacles that have blocked the way to the memory, is a constant in butoh (and in surrealism). To rediscover childhood memory, the movements of children, the life in the womb, the dead that live within the living, the pre-history of man, and "non-human," animal or vegetable origins, recur in butoh - they correspond to the needs that are eternal in man. "My dancing originated in a place that has no affinity with Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples. (...) I was born from the mud and sod." (Hijikata) "Butoh is for me a part in the whole, a kind of endless fetus movements - an energy that always is about to be born but yet never is born." (Akaji Maro) "Butoh is a form that almost precedes dance, just as a child moves and plays before he dances." (Akaji Maro) From the 70's, Hijikata sought the innocence of the child by avoiding too much thinking: "Now I am a frog, far away from the shadow of an idea." He penetrated experiences of his childhood that had often unconsciously given forms to his dance. "He used the metaphor of a meal for dancers served on a plate, on which were placed the dancer's liver, lungs, and heart. The plate was wide and shallow, and the dancer was encouraged to play with the organs and examine them. This is something that children do unconsciously." (Yoko Ashikawa) Hijikata discovered that his students unconsciously began to move like the children of his native place in northern Japan. Hijikata's personal roots were used as focus to reach the archaic in man. He told an Englishman: "I come from Tohoku, but there is Tohoku in everybody. There is even Tohoku in England." Ashikawa "understood that Hijikata didn't talk on a human level. It wasn't on a personal level, but that he talked to humanity", and she also says, "He realized that he could not be alone and continue dancing, so he found more people *within himself*."

"Butoh plays with time; it also plays with perspective, 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 ... we should value everything." (Hijikata) "It is a question of tearing down the division in humans and animals and other species. There are lots of different living beings. Just take such a strange living being as man. The question is who first inhabited the Earth. Was it the will, was it the feeling? Man might just be one phenomenon. Is not man the one that is the least similar to a man?" (Akaji Maro)

Butoh's origins are the wholeness of the human spirit, and its way of thinking comes closest to primitive ways. Its aspiration for complete involvement, for a point that makes the artistic performance to a ritual on a spiritual level where dream and utopia appear as real, goes much further than most modern dance, closer to magic rituals. "We have to trace back the history of the body to remote antiquity", Isamu Ohsuka says, who in Bali of the leader of the village his group Byakko-sha visited, was informed that their performance was suggestive of an ancient trance dance. In Eiko Hosoe's film *Kamaitachi*, Hijikata improvises dances in the rice fields, as the innocent, the fool, possessed by the spirit of a demon who haunts there. Hijikata was "neither modern nor primitive: the two at the same time." (Min Tanaka) One of Sankai-juku's performances is called "Homage to Pre-History" and Tanaka says: "My actual work is to awaken emotions of the body sleeping in the depth of history. It is not necessary to accentuate the presence of the dancer."

Butoh has never, as a movement, had any connection with political or religious direction - its revolt and its spirituality has the body as the center. "The body repeats promises carefully in order to break them." (Min Tanaka) "The patterns of the society are inevitably printed on the body surface as it rolls around on the Earth. (...) Dance emerges between bodies." (Min Tanaka) "The body has something in common with the criminal." (Hijikata) Yoko Ashikawa tells us she was wondering when Hijikata said that a body is "the furthest thing", but when she stood on the floor, she understood it.

"The structure of the body resists the society and its functions raise a fist toward the world. (...) *Ankoku Butoh* (darkness dance) is a joyous despair. The body does not exist unless one is astonished with its ingenuous state. (...) dance is essentially somebody else's business. To evacuate one's own body, to step into obscure region of matter, to rush to other people's important matters. Or, to constantly steal sensations, and to involve others in a chaotic dance of the mind." (Min Tanaka)

"The young should not become sensual addicts. They need a real desire and must act in accordance with it - dance with it." (Hijikata) "It's alright to call your own way of living for butoh - but I don't like that which is happening on stage to be called butoh. It is rather so that all the way from my birth till I die, I want to dance all the time." (Min Tanaka) Like the dramas of more primitive cultures, butoh opposes a professionalization of its art. Though many dancers have reached an incredible perfection, it is not the technical level which means anything, but the spiritual, and many of the foremost butoh dancers have begun without any other dance background. "The substance of dance technique isn't very interesting." (Hijikata) The newest and most untrained members of butoh companies are from the start directed towards performing on stage, but every helper that has carried things or swept the floor are almost more respected than the dancers, Susanna Åkerlund told me. "Although many people tried to establish the Hijikata myth, they don't know the nameless nature of humankind, self-abandonment, and sacrifice. They should know the nameless nature of butoh. This is the reason why the dancers of Hakutobo always use the family name, 'Ashikawa', and the reason why each dancer has a leading part, because we think everybody is on the same level, and that the leading part has no special value." (Yoko Ashikawa)

The eyes almost closed and the common white make-up contribute to the objectivity, the "impersonality" that is necessary to make the body to a medium for hidden or dark forces. Sankai-juku and others have further added to this through shaving their heads.

Another feature that occurs are bent knees, sometimes totally bandy legs. Hijikata tells about the

poor peasants' children in northern Japan, who had to be crammed in with each other in baskets on the fields, crying alone till they passed out. The legs became bent. Ashikawa tells about the moment when she had to stand up after two years of training, crawling on the floor. Hijikata made her wear high clogs and forced her to run. In this way, the "bandy legs" appeared. The bandy legs of the Japanese farmer and to balance on the outer sides of the feet with extreme tension opened the body to accept the wind, and in that open posture the dancer could be transformed into any elemental form. "Straight legs are engendered by a world dominated by reason. Arched legs are born of a world which cannot be expressed in words." (Hijikata)

Butoh wants to transcend the identity of the sex. "There is a fish which is born male, experiences the degeneration of its male organs and ends life transformed into female. This displays the primordial formation of male/female as a whole. It is said this male and female coupled to give birth to an egg ... a strange tale! During its life, this fish experiences both male and female existences ... it contains the origin of Mankind, when the fish first appeared to inhabit the earth." (Ushio Amagatsu) The confusion between the attributes of the two sexes is something that almost only butoh, except for night-club dancers, have taken out from the taboos of the respectable society citizen. Hijikata was the owner of night-clubs and let his dancers earn their living from shows there.

In later times, he almost only worked with women, above all with Yoko Ashikawa. Hijikata especially wanted to uncover woman's original life force and took advice from a dead sister within himself. He avoided rapid and exaggerated movements, kept close to the ground.

Butoh is often very slow. The dancer tries to get rid of his inhibiting conceptions about himself, to be able to be afflicted by any idea or image that can be found in the world. In an exercise called *hoko*, which Susanna introduced for me, the dancer is led by invisible threads, that are stretched from every body part - strong threads that draw in opposite directions at the same time. As the dancer "goes", he is not on his way anywhere - forward is at the same time backward, upward and downward. The body is thread-on of rails, razor-blade sharp under the feet, through the middle of the body, through the only eye in the forehead and the one in the back of the head. These eyes see instead of the usual eyes, which have been transformed into glass and are just visible under the immobile eyelids that have fallen down and don't blink. In the mouth a frail rose. Light is streaming from the finger-tips. Side by side with the dancer, everywhere around him, doubles of him are walking closely and lead him forward.

Butoh is not a muscle dance. Endurance comes from the spiritual state. The slow, Susanna explained, is only slow-looking. On the level of the contrary powers, the pace is huge. Butoh, thus, expresses something entirely different through using the surfaces of the bodies not as surfaces of physical objects, something "pretty" e.g., but as the point of intersection between the contrary powers.

"Did I create this piece or did this piece create me? (...) Superimposition of the world of reality and the surreal world. Aren't the void and the reality one and the same?" (Kazuo Ohno) The void as that which gives an imprint which is my body, is a necessity for the understanding of myself as a force of nature. If instead the body was transparent, one could penetrate its entire contents. Or if the surrounding air's particles were all visible - then the bodies would disappear. Only one of the surfaces is visible, but two visible surfaces that meet become invisible at the moment of their touch. This darkness is the same darkness that penetrates the bodies. To become aware of this darkness is

to become aware of almost all matter in the world. Hijikata remembered his mother's words: "Run with the heart of the blind."

Quotations:

Butoh belongs both to life and death. It is a realization of the distance between a human being and the unknown. It also represents man's struggle to overcome the distance between himself and the material world. 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. (Ushio Amagatsu)

I wasn't really listening [to Hijikata] with my ears, rather I would place my ears near the knee, for example. (Yoko Ashikawa)

It's a strange habit of mine to put myself in helpless situations. (Tatsumi Hijikata)

Taking into your own body the idea that your wrist is not your own - there's an important secret hidden in this concept. (Tatsumi Hijikata)

I've often said in the past that we don't have time to 'express' and 'represent.' (Tatsumi Hijikata)

The noise of the silkworms chewing on mulberry leaves is endless - 'jyari-jyari-jyari'- it goes on and on. If the man takes a nap while this goes on he'll gnash his teeth 'giri-giri-giri.' As the silkworms chew on, the sound of their chewing becomes synchronized with the sound of the gnashing of teeth. (...) All the elements are linked to each other. If matters always work as they do here, I wonder if dance training is really necessary. (Tatsumi Hijikata)

Although I'm not acquainted with Death, Death knows me. (Tatsumi Hijikata)

It is possible to make a superb dance with the eyes alone. (Tatsumi Hijikata)

The dance must be absurd. (Tatsumi Hijikata)

I abhor a world which is regulated from the cradle to the grave. (Tatsumi Hijikata)

Catching some parts of chaos and creating a total chaos. Catching some parts of the other chaos and creating the other chaos, and you'll find this chaos is completely different from the first chaos. (Akaji Maro)

The Butoh costume is like throwing the cosmos onto one's shoulders. And for Butoh, while the costume covers the body, it is the body that is the costume of the soul. (Kazuo Ohno)

There is something between life and death. (Kazuo Ohno)

I don't think that dance can be seen independently from the notion that man lives. (...) There are always hidden wounds, those of the heart, and if you know how to accept and endure them, you will discover the pain and joy which is impossible to express with words. You will reach the realm of poetry which only the body can express. (Kazuo Ohno)

I am dancing a single dance throughout my whole life. My dance is identical with the everlasting revolution. I recovered my language through dancing, and saw politics through dancing. I will live up to ethics through dancing, and perceive the map of history through dancing. I gained courage to stand against power through dancing. I am re-scrutinizing the 'instinct' through dancing. I want to know God through dancing. I want to encounter matter through dancing. (...) A dancer, in essence, is an anonymous lightning, a medium of the place. This is how I want to be. The endless performance/dance. An attempt to verify dance from the minimal to the maximal by rendering my body as an example. Or an attempt to discover and initiate dance in all places. (Min Tanaka)

This body lives with the inevitable molecular tradition, and it ages in apparent ambivalence. (Min Tanaka)

To wish to be mature is a silly thing, I think. There must be a revolution which, people always consider, has not started yet. It is an incessant revolution - without a pause. It is revolution which one never thinks about. (Min Tanaka)

Somebody said dance is something that visits us. But preoccupied about the structure of the body, I politely abstained from the advent of the dance. (Min Tanaka)

The more people try to understand butoh, the less they understand. But that doesn't matter. There are things like the stars, the moon, which you can't reach. Nothing is so beautiful, so marvellous, as the intangible, the incomprehensible. (Min Tanaka)

A married woman who didn't want any more children would close her thighs almost unconsciously while giving birth. Thus the baby who had just put his head out into the world was promptly strangled. This practice, which was known as tsubushi, also survived until not so very long ago. (...) Every second of butoh is a continuous birth and death. (...) Butoh is both the mother and the baby, an open expression of what lies deep within us all. What we can't, or have chosen not to show. (Junnosuke Yoshiyuki)

Butoh has always existed. The dancer takes form from the environment. The stone and the wind are our teachers, the flies and the birch-tree are our dance-partners, the grove and the dunghill our dance-floor, the autumn leaves and the cows are our audience. (...)

When I dance my hands are not hands, my face not face, my feet not feet. My body is part of the environment. The space inside of me and the space around me are one and the same. When the space around is changed (for life is change) my body is changed as well.

Look at the palm of your hand. The eyes see the palm of a hand. Look at the palm of your hand with your soul and you can see also the upper side of the hand. The butoh dancer puts eyes on each part of his body, on the back of the head, on the forehead, elbows, between the toes, in the rearmost tier of the theatre we put eyes and under the floor and behind ...

The stone exists (or do you doubt?). Whatever I and you say, it stands there in thousands of years, and the moss on the stone, cracks and cavities, the ants crawling around. The light of the sun hits the surface, the shadow of the stone. Everything exists.

That is butoh (Susanna ÅÅkerlund)

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