

Contemporary Dance in Japan:

New wave in dance and butoh after the 1990s

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Over the past 12-13 years, some drastic changes have taken place in the environment surrounding Japanese contemporary dance. A number of small to mid-sized theaters were newly built and opened¹, various kinds of new dance festivals were organized, and theater facilities began to sponsor their own dance competitions². The emergence of these new theaters, festivals and competitions has actively contributed to the advent of new kinds of dance in Japan. Additionally, government agencies and private corporations in Japan have granted funds in support of forming national and international networks of theaters, making it easier for theaters to provide support for individual dance artists. For example, the Japan Contemporary Dance Network (JCDN) recently facilitated the communication and partnership between many small theater facilities in Tokyo, Osaka, Yokohama, Kobe, Sapporo, and other cities. JCDN has also encouraged organizers to setup opportunities for interaction between dance artists and audiences, and has organized seminars around the topic of audience development, particularly to develop young audiences. They also made efforts to avoid isolating certain regions, not only by including them on touring routes, but also by involving them in communications at the planning stage. In a word, the infrastructure for the flow of information about domestic and international dance theater has been improving, and is contributing to the vitality of the current dance scene in Japan.

¹ Including the opening of Yokohama Landmark Hall and Aichi Arts Center in 1993, and Setagaya Public Theater and New National Theatre, Tokyo in 1997.

² In 1996, Park Tower Next Dance Festival, in 1999 SoloxDuo Competition, in 2000, Shizuoka Performing Arts Center Choreographers

This period of rapid change coincides with the period approximately 15 years after the death of Tatsumi Hijikata, the founder of butoh, when there was a significant change in the art form. Some contemporary dancers, such as Saburo Teshigawara, Kim Itoh and Kota Yamazaki partially overlap the butoh generation, having appeared on the scene in the late 1980s. However, most of the dancers who are in their prime today in the contemporary Japanese dance scene have had little, if any, interaction with butoh. In order to fully understand the current trends in contemporary dance in Japan, it is important to ask ourselves, how is butoh, which widely changed the concept of dance in the late 20th century, reflected or not reflected in contemporary dance in Japan today. From its very beginning, butoh was supposed to be a contemporary dance. However, when we examine the word “contemporary” in terms of today’s dance market, where the support system is rapidly developing and demanding new forms of dance, we must say that the definition of “contemporary” has changed much since the initial inception of butoh. In this article, I shall first review the history of butoh, and then discuss the issue of contemporary dance in Japan by closely looking at Akira Kasai, one of the most interesting dance artists today.

Emergence of Butoh

What is regarded as butoh today is a physical expression born out of “Ankoku butoh (Dance of Darkness),” which emerged from Japanese contemporary dance after World War II, and became prominent during the 1970s and 80s. When Tatsumi Hijikata (b. 1928 in Akita - d. 1986 in Tokyo) began creating his own works at the end of the 1950s, he aggressively incorporated socially taboo themes of sex and violence into his work, presenting a so-called “rebellion of the human body,” breaking the control of modern reasoning and constantly creating scandals. Hijikata broke away from the control of modern logic by facing the negative side of human beings, an aspect that had not been dealt with before in contemporary dance. (Hence the name “ankoku butoh” or “dance of darkness.”) He attempted to recapture the concept of the physical body not simply as a tool to convey certain linguistic meaning, but as an entity that owns its own time and

Competition, in 2001 Asahi Performing Arts Award, in 2002, Toyota Choreography Award were initiated respectively.

space. In other words, Hijikata felt that the physical body demanded a new expression that did not exist before on stage. He was seen as a heretic in the contemporary dance community in Japan, but went on to develop *ankoku butoh* at a time when a new movement was happening in the contemporary visual arts world, as well. Hijikata avariciously absorbed these avant-garde trends in the arts world through his interactions with artists in the field of literary and visual arts.

With a series of continuous performances, “*Shikino tameno 27ban*” (27 Nights for Four Seasons)” presented in 1972³, Hijikata made a breakthrough performance and established an art form that would be passed down as his own. In this piece, Hijikata redefined the concept of physical body with his view that the human body was a container of enormous memories, from childhood to the moment just before one’s death. Techniques such as *te-boke* (*absent minded hands*), in which the dancer lets their hands wander anxiously in the air with no practical purpose, and *gani mata* (*bandy legs*), in which the body lowers the center of gravity, both of which were totally unheard of in the history of Western dance, were gradually established as techniques specific to Hijikata’s *butoh*. These techniques were developed mainly by women and were very powerful forms of expression for the lower body. This particular series of works by Hijikata, which seemingly emphasized the geographical climate of Tohoku [Northeastern Japan] were also called “Tohoku Kabuki.” They were seen as an effort to rediscover the physicality of Japanese people, which had been left behind in the process of modernization after the Meiji restoration. These techniques were labeled as “pre-modern” or “super-modern” and thus were regarded as a criticism to modernity. In this way, Hijikata’s Tohoku Kabuki can be seen as the beginnings of the post-modern dance movement in Japan.

Looking back at the history of Western-style dance in Japan, various techniques of contemporary dance were developed from those of German and American contemporary dance, up to this point. It is no exaggeration to say that Japanese contemporary dance has intricately evolved, piling up only the Western techniques without sufficient

³ At the Art Theater Shinjuku Bunka in October, 1972.

understanding of the context behind them. Hijikata, by presenting his ill, withering, old and emaciated body, made powerful criticism on the existing expression and its context. Hijikata's theory included a paradoxical structure that the expressions are not valid until deconstructing not just the theory of dance, but of human existence itself.

In the 1960s when Hijikata's *ankoku* *butoh* was starting to gain attention from a small group of people in Japan, post-modern dance started to catch people's attention in the U.S. In Japan, such dancers as Bonjin Atsugi and Suzushi Hanayagi, who were influenced heavily by the minimalism of American post-modern dance, brought in this new wind to the dance world. Atsugi, in particular, witnessed the progressive new movement in dance evolving around the Judson Dance Theater in New York City during the mid-1960s. Prior to living in New York City, Atsugi created works based on the dance classics⁴, but after the influence of the Judson Dance Theater, his works began to include more repeated, continuous movements that were carefully selected and inherited as ballet steps or limited simple actions. As a result, the formation and emotional aspects of the storylines were completely shut out, and instead, physical conditions and expressions themselves were vividly presented. Atsugi is in the same generation as Hijikata, but pioneered the post-modern dance movement in Japan with totally different concepts, and his contribution should really be more widely recognized than it is today.

Kazuo Ohno, another *butoh* artist who supported the art form, was 20 years senior to Hijikata and Atsugi, and had already established a career as a modern dancer, having studied under the schools of German expressionism dance in the 1930s. Ohno met with Hijikata in the 1950s and, although their styles differed greatly, Ohno became an indispensable performing partner in many of Hijikata's works. He then disappeared from the performance stage for a while, miraculously returning when he was 70 years old with *Admiring La Argentina* a piece dedicated to Spanish master dancer Antonia Merce. Following this come-back, Ohno performed such pieces as *Watashino Okasan* (My Mother) and *Shikai* (Dead Sea), directed by Hijikata. After Hijikata's death, Ohno continued to create a number of works with his son, Yoshito Ohno. Today, Kazuo Ohno is

⁴ Another name for ballet. Ballet technique based on five foot positions, invented at the Royal Academy of Music in Paris in the 17th century..

98 years old. As such, he cannot hide the weakness of his aging body, but he still performs as a butoh artist in his wheelchair. Ohno says that to live and to perform butoh need to be experienced with exactly equal weight. He has touched many people world wide with his commitment and determination to dance for as long as he lives.

The advent of Akira Kasai

Studying under Kazuo Ohno, Akira Kasai came into the Japanese contemporary dance scene in the 1960s. After his encounters with Ohno and Hijikata, Kasai proceeded to create an original butoh world for himself. He founded Tenshi-kan (House of the Angels) in 1971 and, besides creating his own works, has also been earnest in teaching his followers. He is active as a researcher of eurythmics, a movement-art theory established by Rudolf Steiner, a German philosopher who also founded the philosophy of anthroposophy. In recent years, Kasai has been actively collaborating with new wave contemporary dancers, pushing the envelope of the existing concept of butoh to cultivate a new realm of expression.

Before the 1970s, Kasai's butoh had a clear direction of getting close to spiritual existence by sublimating the physical body and exhausting it with dance. After completing his butoh thesis, *Tenshi-ron* (Theory of Angels) in 1972, Kasai went to Germany with the purpose of studying Steiner's theories. He stayed in Germany for 7 years before returning to Japan and, in the years following his return, dedicated his efforts to furthering the Steiner research, promoting eurythmics, and performing again in Japan. In the summer of 1996, Kasai conducted a U.S. tour and, from this time on, his works saw notable changes. Kasai stopped presenting his works as secret cult rituals, which was previously the signature of his butoh works. Instead, he began to interact with the outside world by collaborating with other contemporary dance artists in both choreography and performance.

His dance works became very easy to understand, as if he was declaring the new direction for the mainstream audience, going along with the social trend. This change can be clearly seen in his duo work with Kuniko Kisanuki, a contemporary dance artist, in

the work titled, *Yes, No, Yes, No* which premiered in 1999. Kisanuki is not the kind of dance artist who would make works using existing dance vocabulary. Kasai's encounter with Kisanuki unearthed his secret world of butoh performed as ritual, bringing him out into the light of the main stage of metropolitan public theaters. *Yes, No, Yes, No* was a stunning duo work in which the sharp, gallant, boyish movement of Kisanuki and the incessant, unruly and agitating movement of Kasai crisscrossed with dazzling speed.

In the year 2000, Kasai formed Akira Kasai Dance Unit, and performed with Kisanuki, Ryohei Kondo, Yoko Ando, Naoka Uemura and others in their 20s and 30s, who were in their prime as dancers and full of energy.⁵ Appearing on stage, his hair blonde and wearing sunglasses, Kasai danced through the whole piece with astonishing stamina. Usually, someone who performs freestyle can only do so for five minutes before their movement vocabulary dries out, and ends up becoming repetitive. However, there was no such banal repetition in Kasai's freestyle. The audience could not predict his next movement at all, and were continuously shocked by his unexpected movement. To my astonishment, also, all of his movements that, at a glance, seemed like a series of instantaneous improvisational movements were actually choreographed to each and every hand and foot movement. All of the musical pieces for the work had strong beats and rhythms and were abstract pieces with no conventional melody. Kasai also actively incorporated elements of street dance, including hip-hop into his pieces. The dashing impetus of the competing structure rejects any room for a story line to be developed by the audience. There is not a moment of stagnation in his work.

In April 2001, Kasai premiered *Kafun Kakumei* (Pollen Revolution) as part of Theater Trum's solo series. In the opening scene, the audience was astonished by his entrance wearing the full costume of the young maiden from *Kyokanoko Musume Dojoji*, one of the most famous kabuki dance pieces. Kasai presented the complete image of the young maiden, formidably clad in the costume from *Musume Dojoji* at the opening of the piece then started to destroy it from inside out. Wearing the kimono and a traditional Japanese wig, Kasai danced frantically to the music of "Dojoji," swinging up the dangling

⁵ "Spinning Spiral Shaking Strobe" in 2000.

kimono sleeves, fluttering the bottom of the dragging kimono, slovenly widening the collar, oblivious of the kimono loosening and going out of shape. He danced incessantly with stunning energy and concentration, as if spreading out into all directions infinitely with his elaborate costume. The image did not invoke any semblance of the human body. He danced as if he was smashing his whole body into pieces.

In 2003, Kasai choreographed and directed *Ginga Keikaku* (Galaxy Plan) and performed with Kim Itoh. It was his peculiar metaphor to derive the story of Cain and Abel from the Old Testament for the structure of the work. Through his works Kasai attempts to derive the spiritual world that has built up the modern society, using various metaphors paradoxically, reviving it into a form, validating and accepting it for once through his physical body, then, the next moment, destroying its structure from the inside out with enormous impetus. This can be seen as a major characteristic of his recent works.

From butoh going beyond Japan to the Post-Butoh movement

It was when butoh was presented at the 14th Nancy International Theater Festival in 1980 that the art form that had been a minor artistic expression in Japan was officially introduced to Western audiences.⁶ The international popularity of butoh owes its foundation to the activities of such artists and groups as Kazuo Ono, Sankai Juku and Sebi.⁷ As the reputation of butoh grew outside of Japan, it ironically made its way back into Japan to be introduced to the main stream in 1985 -- *Butoh Festival '85* was held in Tokyo organized by Nihon Bunka Zaidan (Nippon Cultural Center). Thus, butoh, regarded as one of the contemporary dances of Japan, stimulated and influenced dance and theaters in the U.S. and Europe, and its popularity encouraged other contemporary dances of Japan to be exported actively abroad. Around this time, with the advent of Pina Bausch's Tanz Theater and the French Nouveau dance⁸, German and French contemporary dance began to attract the public's attention. Butoh was accepted in this context in Europe as a shocking physical expression totally different from that of the Western dance.

⁶ To be accurate, Koh Murobushi and others performed in 1978 at Nouveau College in Paris, which should be considered as the European premiere of butoh.

⁷ Min Tanaka was performing abroad as well but did not call his dance "butoh."

Then, in 1986, as if to replace the death of Hijikata, Saburo Teshigawara came onto the scene. Teshigawara's dance form was referred to as "post-butoh," indicating that it was regarded as the birth of a new kind of dance in Japan. Teshigawara kept a certain distance from the contemporary dance community in Japan, and from butoh as well. He was the first Japanese dancer to win at the Concours de Choregraphique de Bagnolet in 1986, and his dance then became the second Japanese contemporary dance form to be introduced to the world after butoh. His dance was different from the mysterious symbolism of Sankai Juku, the group that was active in Europe and the United States then, or from the expressive butoh of Kazuo Ohno. It was also different from that of Dairakudakan's erotic physicality and festive stage presence. Teshigawara's dance was highly regarded as it directly reflected the sensitive receptivity of contemporary metropolitan lives, and opened up new possibilities for dance in the post-butoh age.

Development of the New Wave and Kasai

Teshigawara's dance aroused a new awareness for the physicality in dance, including movements from everyday motion and mimes to acrobatics, which up until this time, had not been a large part of dance in Japan. Critical discussions regarding body became active in the context of dance. In addition, digital images of bodies through computer assistance, entered into the dance world. It can be said that a new image of the human body was in demand along with the expansion of human perception.

Min Tanaka's works are expressive, intending to present the idea that the body generates its own stories, as opposed to being a tool of telling existing stories, by tracing back the perception and memories of one's body. This is the basic stance of butoh works.

There are also groups such as H. Art Chaos, lead by Sakiko Oshima, and Nomado's lead by Nakao Ikemiya, whose works are expressive but have no relation to butoh for their roots. Oshima, in particular, dares to put a physical body in a fantasy world with her bold choreography matching the spectacular aesthetics of the stage and deriving astonishing

⁸ Specifically refers to the French new wave dance of the 1980s.

concentration from dancer Naoko Shirakawa's performance.

Popular culture, which had then been actively incorporated into contemporary dance, also gave birth to a dance in which the dancer's body reflects the youth culture of contemporary metropolitan Japanese society, known as "J-dance." For example, in the works of Nibroll (lead by Mikuni Yanaihara) we see a body which suddenly snaps and explodes after feeling continuous stress and, in contrast, Strange Kinoko Dance Company (lead by Chie Itoh), presents a fluid physicality of happy young girls that flow nimbly and swiftly through daily life.

In contrast, Kim Itoh is another dance artist who explores a new way of communication with the audience by expressing humor born from the gap between obsessive concentration of perception on stage and the reality of normal, every day life. Condors (lead by Ryohei Kondo) and Idevian Crew (lead by Shigehiro Ide) belong to a group called "owarai kei (comical school)" and pursue their entertainment line by incorporating mimeography and comedy into their dances, creating a nonsensical world which defies explanation. The audience is encouraged to just sit back and enjoy the absolute nonsense and the comical dance itself.

All of these so called "J-dance" artists create works incorporating various dance techniques⁹ and ideas. One thing that connects the J-dance artists is that their works reject discussion using established semantics. In order to avoid being consumed into an overall story, J-dance artists construct their works by collecting bits and pieces of unrelated scenes or using a multitude of simple, daily images.

In contrast to the light-hearted and elusive characteristics of J-Dance, dancer Mika Kurosawa tries to create her expression as far as possible from the physicality developed under the conventional dance technique. Kurosawa agitates the audience by putting on costumes that invoke the world of gay show dance, or of certain fairy tale characters.

⁹ One can learn the basic techniques such as release technique, contact improvisation, butoh, capoeira, etc. by participating in ubiquitous dance

Choreographers Tsuyoshi Shirai and Kaya Ohashi, try to recognize and reconstruct a new sense of body by appealing to various perceptions. These choreographers use their physical bodies without dance techniques as the tools of exploration, more common in performance art, as they search for the roots of bodily movement.

Within the above context of the development of contemporary Japanese dance, butoh artist Akira Kasai stands in an extremely interesting position. As opposed to many of the contemporary dancers creating works based on one's own physical perception (such condition as pleasant or unpleasant, for an example) Kasai sets his physical body in a strictly conceptual state, not in the state of real world perception, yet create dance works with the intention to sublimate the physical body.

The history of dance from the modern times to current was lead and inherited by innovative choreographers, butoh being the prime example. The history of contemporary Japanese dance has been developed by those who seek the truth with continuous questionings and denials of the existing concepts and conventional aesthetics. Butoh is not simply one certain style of dance. And although we must respect the roots of butoh as it was developed by Tatsumi Hijikata, it would be unwise to take our eyes away from Akira Kasai, as he is just about to roll out the grand new possibilities of butoh for the post-modern age.

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