**Butoh**

**Summary**

The Japanese avant-garde dance, butoh[[1]](#footnote-1), developed out of experiments and collaborations directed by Hijikata Tatsumi[[2]](#footnote-2) (1928-1986) and often involved Ohno Kazuo (1906-2010) in Tokyo beginning in the late 1950s. Butoh is stereotypically slow-moving, performed in white makeup, with shaved heads and distorted faces and bodies. This dance genre cannot easily be pinned down to one set of movement techniques or aesthetics. Instead, its aesthetics exist on a spectrum traceable to styles established by Hijikata and Ohno. The former choreographed intricately detailed surrealist spectacles that resisted interpretation. The latter created fanciful and sublime improvised solos, aimed at expressing universal truths about life and death. As butoh has been disseminated and adapted around the world, the polarities between Hijikata and Ohno—structure versus improvisation, arbitrariness versus an assumption of unity of movement and emotion, spectacle and entertainment versus personal catharsis—are still operative. What all versions of butoh have in common is an image-based approach to generating movement, emphasis on the dissolution and transformation of the dancing subject, an intense physicality that may result in explosions of movement across the stage or a strictly contained tension beneath the surface of the skin, and themes such as death, sex, marginality, and nature.

**Development of Butoh**

Although Hijikata and Ohno are frequently referred to as butoh’s co-founders, it is more accurate to speak of the two men as central figures in the form’s development and dissemination. The elder, Ohno, was inspired to begin dancing as a young man after seeing Antonia Mercé, known as ‘La Argentina,’ and Harold Kreutzberg perform. He studied with three of Japan’s modern dance pioneers, Ishii Baku, Eguchi Takaya, and Miya Misako, the latter two of whom studied under Mary Wigman in Germany and were instrumental in introducing *Neue Tanz* to Japan. Ohno’s dancing was interrupted by nine years in military service, including one as a prisoner of war in Papua New Guinea. Upon his return to Japan, Ohno resumed classes with Miya, and in 1949 began giving a series of contemporary dance recitals.

Hijikata, meanwhile, studied modern dance in his home province of Akita with a student of Eguchi, Masumura Katsuko. Upon settling in Tokyo, Hijikata studied at the ballet, jazz, and modern dance studio of Andō Mistuko, where he became acquainted with Ohno, and the two performed together in Andō’s dances while producing their own works. Hijikata’s 1959 dance, *Kinjiki* (*Forbidden Colours*), a duet between Hijikata and Ohno’s son, Yoshito (1938-), based on the homoerotic Mishima Yukio novel of the same name is with hindsight considered the first butoh performance: an older man pursues a young man, the two mime sodomy, the young man suffocates a chicken between his thighs. While this fifteen-minute narrative work does not resemble the style that we now associate with butoh, its shocking staging of taboo themes presages butoh’s association with submerged violence and sexuality.

From 1960 to 1968, Ohno largely abandoned choreographing his own dances to be a participant in Hijikata’s ‘Dance Experiences’ alongside his son, Yoshito, as well as Kasai Akira, Ishii Mitsutaka, Motofuji Akiko, Maro Akaji, among others. It was during this time that the name *ankoku butoh* (暗黒舞踏 “dance of utter darkness”) began to be used. Butoh comes from the combination of two kanji: 舞 (‘bu’), meaning ‘to dance’; and 踏 (‘toh’), meaning ‘to step, to tread’. Until the 1960s, the word *butoh* had been used as a catchall for any dance that was not traditional Japanese dance (舞踊 ‘*buyō*’); it was largely used to mean Western dance. Kasai, a noted butoh performer in his own right, claims credit for insisting that *butoh* rather than *buyō* be used to refer to Hijikata’s *ankoku* dance experiments, beginning in 1966.[[3]](#footnote-3) As dancers including Ohno, Kasai, Maro, Ishii, and others struck out on their own, they continued to call their work butoh, but the ‘utter darkness’ qualifier was dropped along the way. Eventually the word came to encompass all the iterations and adaptations of the form developed by Hijikata and Ohno, along with their colleagues and students.

The 1968 performance *Hijikata Tatsumi and Japanese People: Rebellion of the Body* was a turning point for butoh, after which the form began to be codified around Hijikata’s developing ideas about the Japanese body. He began to take inspiration from remembered events and fantastical stories from his childhood in the northern Tohoku region of Japan, while also drawing on images from visual art and his own surrealist writing to devise a novel movement vocabulary. Ashikawa Yoko was Hijikata’s muse and star performer who worked closely with him to develop this new style, epitomized in 1972’s *Hosotan* (*Story of Smallpox*)which featured an ensemble of women dancers including Ashikawa and Kobayashi Saga. Waguri Yukio, one of Hijikata’s dancers, created a ‘Butoh-Kaden’ CD-ROM in 1998 that documents Hijikata’s *butoh-fu*, or choreographic methodology, by matching Waguri’s written notes of the language Hijikata used to direct their movement with examples of movement sequences.

After 1968, Ohno gave up performing on the stage, although he continued to teach twice-weekly lessons at his home dance studio, until the debut of his solo performance career in 1977 with the landmark choreography *Admiring La Argentina*, directed by Hijikata. A 1980 performance of *La Argentina* at the Nancy International Theatre Festival made the seventy-four-year-old Ohno an international sensation, and introduced butoh to the world.

**Contributions to the Field and to Modernism**

Butoh was a major development of twentieth-century dance whose influence on contemporary movement practices in the twenty-first century is still evident. Even so, its relationship to modernism is a complex one. Any consideration of it must take into account Japan’s historical and geopolitical efforts to align itself with European and American modernity beginning in 1865. Moreover, butoh must be seen in the context of the Japanese avant-garde, both pre- and post-World War II, which was itself in dialogue with the European avant-garde. While grounded in specific iterations of European modernism (*Neue Tanz*, Genet, Artaud), butoh was also part of artistic movements in Japan in the late 1950s and 1960s that soundly rejected Japanese modernism (for example, the modernist theatre, *shingeki*, and modern dance) in favour of avant-garde practices that looked to pre-modern (pre-1865 Westernization) Japan for influences. In the latter, it is mobilizing modernist ideas such as the reprise of tradition, rejection of realism, and a reaction to rapid industrialization in order to reject a Japanese modernism – largely a pre-WWII movement – that merely imitated European modernism. Instead, artists put forward new forms that responded specifically to contemporary (i.e. post-war) Japanese contexts. The work of Hijikata and Ohno and their successors displays the rejection of meaning, commercialism, and utility concurrent with the embrace of universality, success, and therapeutic or cathartic applications, and reveals multiple modernisms at play in one movement form.

**Legacy**

In the early 1980s, Ohno, Dairakudakan, Sankai Juku, Nakajima Natsu, and Min Tanaka began to appear on global stages in Europe and the United States, leading growing numbers of non-Japanese dancers to take up butoh. This trend was supported by dancers such as Murobushi Ko, Carlotta Ikeda, Furukawa Anzu, and Tamano Koichi who settled in France, Germany, and the United States, respectively. Today, several cities around the world sponsor annual butoh festivals featuring contemporary butoh dancers such as Yuko Kaseki (Germany), SU-EN (Sweden), and Diego Piñon (Mexico).

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**References and Further Reading**

Baird, Bruce. 2012. *Hijikata Tatsumi and Butoh: Dancing in a Pool of Grey Grits*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. (This recent book, the first detailed English-language examination of Hijikata’s life and work, traces the development of butoh from 1959 through Hijikata’s death in 1986 and includes meticulous reconstructions, through archival and oral history research, of dances for which there exists no video documentation.)

Klein, Susan B. 1989. *Ankoku Butō: The Premodern and Postmodern Influences on the Dance of Utter Darkness*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University East Asia Program. (A seminal English text on butoh, this short book places the form in the context of Japanese post-war dance and theatre, and traces the sources of aesthetics identified as central to butoh, including the grotesque, metamorphosis, violence, and marginality; includes important translations of early 1980s texts by Japanese critics about butoh.)

Kurihara Nanako, ed. 2000. Hijikata Tatsumi: The Words of Butoh. Special issue, *The Drama Review* 44(1): 10-81. (‘The Words of Butoh’ makes a collection of Hijikata’s writings available in English for the first time, and provides contextualisation for those texts through an introductory essay and a chronology of Hijikata’s life.)

Ohno, Kazuo and Yoshito Ohno. 2004. *Kazuo Ohno’s World from Without and Within*. Trans. John Barrett. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press. (*Ohno’s World* gives the reader an intimate participant-observer’s perspective on the physical and aesthetic aspects of Ohno’s dance through photographs, stories related by Ohno, an overview of his life, and an in depth discussion of his most acclaimed dance, *Admiring La Argentina*.)

Sas, Miryam. 2003. Hands, Lines, Acts: Butoh and Surrealism. *Qui Parle*, 13(2): 19-51. (Using Hijikata’s writings as an entry point, Sas finds in his post-war surrealist “experiences” commonalities with pre-war surrealist aims.)

**Online video and photographic sources**

Hijikata Tatsumi *Story of Smallpox* (*Hosotan*), 1972 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ks8bCtAyRUY&feature=relmfu>

Hijikata Tatsumi *A Girl* <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sCT3vp0Gu1o&list=PL9A932CB0C1499FEE&index=9&feature=plpp_video>

Interview with Morishita Takashi, head of Hijikata Archive at Keio University, images: <http://performingarts.jp/E/art_interview/1008/1.html>

Ashikawa Yoko <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lb7nSr8BnGs&feature=relmfu>

Kazuo Ohno Dance Studio YouTube Channel: <http://www.youtube.com/user/kazuoohnodancestudio/videos?sort=p&view=0>

Hosoe Eikoh photos of Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno: <http://artblart.com/2011/06/29/exhibition-eikoh-hosoe-theatre-of-memory-at-the-art-gallery-of-new-south-wales-sydney/>

Interview with Maro Akaji: <http://www.performingarts.jp/E/art_interview/0506/1.html>

Sankai Juku YouTube channel: <http://www.youtube.com/user/sankaijukumedia>

Interview with Ko Murobushi: <http://www.performingarts.jp/E/art_interview/1109/1.html>

Photo essays of historical butoh performances by Min Tanaka, Anzu Furukawa, Byakko-sha, Sankai Juku, and Kazuo Ohno <http://www.butoh.de/images/Slideshow/slideshow.html>

Nakajima Natsu performance: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aKj6uxm_EH4&feature=related>

Carlotta Ikeda performance: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=opaS-W7b6GI&list=PL9A932CB0C1499FEE&index=26&feature=plpp_video>

*Dance of Darkness:* documentaryonline in 6 parts: <http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x9cj0v_dance-of-darkness-a-documentary-on_creation>

Histoire du Butoh (French documentary): <http://ma-tvideo.france2.fr/video/iLyROoafvCFt.html>

Butoh: Body on the Edge of Crisis (preview clip): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yUuL4TiaPN8>

Yuko Kaseki YouTube channel: <http://www.youtube.com/user/cokaseki>

SU-EN *Blush*, 2009 <https://vimeo.com/14782582>

Diego Piñon *Ekua Itsi-Behind the Mirror* http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vnBik7aWbiw&list=PL9A932CB0C1499FEE&index=29&feature=plpp\_video

Japan Society YouTube channel has clips from past performances by contemporary butoh performers: <http://www.youtube.com/user/JapanSocietyNYC/videos?query=butoh>

Butoh UK’s photo gallery: <http://www.butohuk.com/>

CAVE Nexus video (international butoh community self-generated video archive; need to register for access): <http://nexus.cavearts.org/video>

CAVE Nexus photographs (international butoh community self-generated photo archive; need to register for access): <http://nexus.cavearts.org/photo/album/list>

1. ‘Butoh’ and ‘Ohno’ are rendered here with an ‘h’ as they are both well-Anglicized with that spelling. Other Japanese names and words are transcribed with macrons. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Japanese names are given surname first, given name second. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Some point to the word butoh’s signification of Western dance as a gesture to the intercultural influences on the dance, but it is more likely that the sense of foreign-ness implied by the term was employed not to reference other dance traditions, but rather to signal that they were seeking to create a new kind of dance, something entirely unfamiliar that had not been seen before. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)