Historical footage of Hijikata performing, *Dance of Darkness*, 1989

Butô: Dance of Difference
Bruce Baird, University of Massachusetts, Amherst

Butô is a name for a kind of dance or performing art that has its origins in the activities of Hijikata Tatsumi in the late 1950s and 1960s.[1] When we hear the word butô, we are likely to call to mind powerful and grotesque images of performers covered in white paint moving at an achingly slow pace, but the art form did not start out that way. Hijikata Tatsumi was a forceful personality, and he dominated a small world of dancers for the better part of a decade, as they experimented with new forms of bodily articulation and endeavored to overthrow pre-existing dance concepts and categories.[2] He exercised a near monopoly on the tasks of choreographer, director, and producer, while dancing as well. He came from a background of German Expressionist Dance, or *neue Tanz*, and also studied tap, ballet, flamenco, and jazz dance. According to reports, his initial dances in 1959 and 1960 were somewhat representational or mimetic dances of an older male sodomizing a younger male, a mother sending a son to war, and a bride being passed from one family to another as one might hand over a piece of luggage.[3] The descriptions of these early dances put one in mind of the stark and angular movements of the Standard Bearer and Death in German Expressionist pioneer Kurt Jooss's similarly mimetic dance theater piece *The Green Table* (1932).

For various reasons, Hijikata and his cohorts became dissatisfied with that level of representational dance and ranged far and wide during the next decade in pursuit of a new kind of dance. Experiments on stage included sending a dancer to do arabesques and attitudes with a marble inserted in her anus (with the proviso that she not allow the marble to fall out); having male dancers ride female dancers like horses and lash them with huge phalli; instructing dancers to move in lock-step unison; subjecting the audience to interminable periods of boredom; eating cake; running wind sprints; riding bicycles; taking pictures of the audience; shaving heads; and dueling with anatomy charts. In addition to these specific examples, they carved out space on stage for such things as madness, disease, senility, violence, and pain. As with many other places in the world in the 1960s, it was a heady time.

They called their inchoate dance form various things, but finally settled on "ankoku buyô," and later on "ankoku butô." "Ankoku" means "dark black" and "buyô" is a standard word for dance, while "butô" is the standard word for any western style dance such as flamenco, ballet, and waltz. The word "butô" is a compound word borrowed from Chinese, the first part of which means "dance" and the second part of which means " to tread or stomp." This has led some observers to characterize butô as a dance of earthy stomping. However, initially it seems that the dancers just wanted a word that would suggest something new and out of the ordinary, so the phrase "ankoku butô" likely implied "the foreign dance of darkness," where the word "foreign" should be read more in its meaning of "unrelated" or "not belonging" rather than in terms of an East-West interaction or in terms of a specific content of stamping.

To say that Hijikata was domineering is not to imply that he was a solitary genius with no collaborators. He was a product of

Ôno performing,
Dance of Darkness,
1989

his time, and had fellow-travelers on his journey to create something new. One was the dancer Ôno Kazuo, who also shared Hijikata's training in German Expressionist dance and had gained a modicum of standing in the postwar modern dance world of Japan. Eighteen years later, he was to become a major force in the world of butô, but in 1959 he quit choreographing his own dances and followed Hijikata's direction and choreography to a great extent. Other early dancers were Kasai Akira and Ishii Mitsutaka. Hijikata also cultivated contacts from the Neo-Dada, Happenings, and Fluxus spheres, and he was not shy about asking for help with stage, lighting, and costume design. And, he made the acquaintance of Takiguchi Shûzô and other surrealists and began to encode all his artistic manifestos as surrealist essays.[4] Finally, he was fast friends with the translator of de Sade, and dabbler in the occult, Shibusawa Tatsuhiko. The specific problematic of each of these groups is beyond the scope of this essay, but if I might be permitted a generality, these three groups of people shared some common themes. One was the notion that the world was an infinitely more complicated place than it was made out to be by the modern arbiters of both Japanese and Western convention and tradition. The second was that the world of the everyday was shot through with conventions and strictures which controlled what one could say and think, but that humans had become so inured to these that they were not even aware that these conventions and discursive limits were constantly functioning in the background. So each group hunted for an alternative to the current regime of socializing pressures by recourse to processes employing the unconscious, randomness, shock, or all three.

In the late 1960s, Hijikata began to take seriously the task of creating from these surrealistic postulates a choreographic method or a surrealism of the body. He developed a structured choreographic method, which is very useful for generating new movements or a new bodily vocabulary.[5] The first part of the method consists of finding new movements or poses by looking at many sources, which may not have originally been thought fertile ground for movement- or pose-generation or for artistic portrayal in the dance world. These sources included various people such as low class prostitutes, farmers, diseased people, as well as animals, all sorts of paintings and sculpture, and even things such as the quality of lines in a painting.

Next, the method consists of using imagery exercises to subject a newly discovered base movement or pose to various imagery operations in order to modify it. These modifications might include altering the person who is imagined to be doing the movement, so that if an old person is imagined doing the movement, it will look different from the way it might look if a young person is imagined to be doing it. (Of course, there were only young people doing the movements, but they would still be instructed to imagine that they were young or old while doing the movements.) Or one might also alter the imaginary background medium in which one does a movement, so one might imagine doing the movement in water or in the medium of glass, and that background medium would have an effect on the movement. Finally, one might go on to imagine various things such as being eaten by insects, or shocked by thousands of volts of electricity, with the assumption that the base movement or pose will be qualitatively transformed by undergoing such an experience.

For Hijikata, as a dedicated student of surrealism, part of the point of these choreographic experiments seems to have been to find out what would happen when he combined a pose gained from observation of a character in something like a Hieronymus Bosch painting with the mental imagery of doing the movement as an old

Ôno performing,
Dance of Darkness,
1989

woman who is being shocked by ten-thousand volts of electricity while making the base movement in a background medium of stone. In part, the question is as simple as randomly combining all these things to see what sort of new thing will come out, which will not be subject to the current regime of conventions and habits. In addition there seems to have been the notion that if you over-load the mind sufficiently, the overload will break down the con-ventions and everyday habitual thought and thus enable an alternate practice to come forth.

Once Hijikata had a set of movements and had subjected them to a set of mental operations, then he would string them together in a seemingly random way in order to multiply the aleatory affect. He might follow the movement/pose of the Hieronymus Bosch character cum old woman moving in stone while being shocked by electricity with an otter cum young girl brushing its teeth in a background medium of foam while imagining itself being looked at from the upper right hand side of the stage. Then Hijikata intended that the stochastic string of operations enact an underlying nar-rative. The string of movements might be telling the story of a prostitute waiting for an abortion on a sultry day, or a mother car-rying a child on her back as she escaped her husband's abusive wrath. Of course the general orientation to madness, senility, dis-ease, and pain remained in butô; so although the technique should have let Hijikata tell any underlying narrative he liked with these ar-bitrary chains of arbitrary movements, modified in arbitrary ways, in general the underlying narratives focused on diseased or so-cially dispossessed peoples, or bodies in pain (to the extent that we know these underlying narratives at all).

As Hijikata continued the quest for a surrealism of the body, artistic differences caused the butô movement to fragment. Two of Hijikata's early collaborators, Kasai Akira and Ishii Mitsutaka, were the first to establish themselves as independent perform-ers who still termed what they did "butô." Kasai felt that Hijikata's dances were too full of spectacle and bizarre elements, and that these oddities were threatening some deeper meaning that Kasai thought butô should properly strive for. Perhaps suggesting butô's roots in the German Expressionist idea, promulgated by Rudolf Laban, that one could catalogue a universal trans-cultural vocab-ulary of the body and gesture, Kasai's dance was predicated on the idea of a one-to-one correspondence between movement and meaning. Ishii came to feel that butô should express some deep reality that could only be attained through improvisation in nature; so for a period of time, he danced out in nature: in snowfields, wa-terfalls, and forests. In the late 1960s, Ôno was to break with Hi-jikata and devote several years to making films, after which he lapsed into silence. Then in 1977 at age 71 he came out of quasi-retirement to choreograph his own piece *Admiring La Argentina*, which catapulted him to world-wide fame when he presented it in Avignon in 1980. Ôno's dances were emotionally very dense, and they usually featured highly melodramatic western music such as opera arias sung by Maria Callas, Elvis songs, or religious devo-tional music such as *Ave Maria* or *Amazing Grace.* Ôno likewise re-tained the term butô to describe his dances. Another disciple, Maro Akaji, formed his own company in 1972 and focused on dances that were even more spectacular than those of Hijikata, while in general following the surrealistic choreographic principles for generating new movement that Hijikata had developed. Finally, these camps of dancers were joined by a relative outsider, Tanaka Min. Min had studied ballet and modern dance for a decade from 1963 to 1973, and then he broke from these frameworks and started his own solo career. This included activities like standing naked in one place for hours so that viewers could watch the play

of light and shadows across his body as the sun or clouds progressed overhead. In 1983 and 1984, Hijikata choreographed dances for Min, but Min never was genuinely a pupil of Hijikata's and did not learn the surrealistic dance method described previously. However, Min also called his dance activities butô.

To oversimplify another complex set of issues, there are currently several continua along which self-styled butô performers sort themselves. One is the issue of improvisation (often but not necessarily in a natural surrounding) as opposed to minutely structured dance. The improvisation faction holds that only unplanned or spontaneous movement can give access to the deep reality of the self or the universe, while the structure faction argues that the arbitrary nature of the various combinations of movements, background media, and imagery exercises is the path to true butô.

Another is the issue of what we might call the connection between the movement or bodily signifier and the signified. Hijikata's dance was predicated on the assumption that one could create a new bodily vocabulary by arbitrarily combining all sorts of different elements, subjected to different operations, into new signs (somewhat as if one arbitrarily combined letters together to make new words and then arbitrarily combined the words together to make new sentences). These new movement signifiers could then be arbitrarily used to convey an underlying narrative. It is as if he created thousands of new movement signifiers, but he never bothered to tell anyone the signifieds or the narratives that he intended for those new signifiers to convey. Conversely, Kasai and Ôno seem to assume that the bodily movements that they use perfectly convey the emotional states they intend with no gap between the movement signifier and the signified (although they would never put it in these Saussurian terms), even though Ôno

used Hijikata's choreographic technique to a certain extent. This, they assumed, allowed them to present universally understandable dances that conveyed universally felt emotions.

Finally there is the issue of spectacle and entertainment, as opposed to simple personally cathartic, emotional, or authentic experience. Maro is the most accepting of butô as a form of (often tragic) entertainment, featuring circus-style spectacle, which happens to focus on the grotesqueries of the world. In addition, Maro has not been averse to incorporating elements that are relatively representational in nature. One can find a scene in the Maro oeuvre in which a badger with a Hitler mustache sodomizes a Japanese peasant who has a Japanese flag wrapped around his head, blinding him. It is not unreasonable to read off a message about the dangers of being blinded by patriotism in such a dance-drama. Other dancers maintain that only simple personally cathartic improvisational solos deserve the name butô and that anything else is a mockery of the name. In practice, all these approaches have overlapped and fed into each other, so the reality is much messier than the presentation of the three continua would seem to suggest. The important thing to note is that dancers on all points of these three continua call their dances butô, and by now, it is not really an exaggeration to say that there are as many approaches to butô as there are people who claim to be practicing it.

However, butô's many approaches are not equally visible in Europe and America. Maro was the artist most able to pass on his understanding of the art form to disciples, and in 1976, six of his disciples (including Ôsuka, Carlotta Ikeda, Murobushi Kô, and Amagatsu Ushio of Sankai Juku) each left to form her or his own company. For a time, among the Maro lineage, there was the notion "One person, one troupe," which was a kind of slogan-

as-artistic-manifesto trumpeting the ability of anyone to be the principle choreographer and head of a butô troupe. In addition, many of Maro's disciples relocated to Europe where they were warmly received by Europeans eager to embrace a new art form.

Butô, then, is no longer a unitary art form, but a shapeless shifting art performed by a caterwauling set of artists who seek to find their way forward into the future while vigorously debating butô's present. Rather than being an impediment, the tension between these factions and their paradoxical aims has served to enrich the art form. In North America, our understanding of the full contours of that debate and of the possibilities of the art form will continue to widen as we are exposed to a greater number of artists coming at the art form from various perspectives. Edin Vélez's video *Dance of Darkness* (1989), discussed in the next essay in this catalogue, constitutes an important first step process.

Bibliography

Baird, Bruce. "Butô and the Burden of History: Hijikata Tatsumi and *Nihonjin*." PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2005.
———. "Metaphorical Miscegenation in Memoirs: the Literary Activities of Hijikata Tatsumi." In *Hermenuetical Strategies: Methods of Interpretation in the Study of Japanese Literature*. PAJLS 5 (Summer 2004): 369-385.
———. "Structureless in Structure: the Choreographic Tectonics in Hijikata Tatsumi's Butô." In *Modern Japanese Theater and Performance*. Edited by David Jortner, et al, 93-108. Lanham MD: Lexington Books, 2006.
Butoh: Piercing the Mask. Directed by Michael Blackwood. New York: Incite Media, 1991. Videocassette.
Gôda Nario. "'Hijikata butô': Sakuhin nôto" [Hijikata's Butô: Notes on the Dances]. Pts. 1-6. *Asubesutokan tsûshin 2* (Jan. 1987): 28-35; 5 (Oct. 1987): 38-43; 6 (Jan. 1988): 40-46; 7 (April 1988): 22-28; 8 (Aug. 1988): 26-32; and 10 (July 1989): 46-52.
Hoffman, Ethan photographs; text by Mark Holborn et al. *Butoh: Dance of the Dark Soul*. New York: Aperture Foundation, 1987.
Kurihara, Nanako. "The Most Remote Thing in the Universe: A Critical Analysis of Hijikata Tatsumi's Butoh Dance." PhD diss., New York University, 1996.
Viala, Jean and Nourit Masson-Sekine. *Butoh: Shades of Darkness*. Tokyo: Shufunotomo, 1988.

Endnotes

[1] A note on Romanization: the long vowel of butôh is also commonly indicated by writing "butoh," and for the same reason Ôno Kazuo's surname is often written "Ohno." I have opted to use the macron to indicate the long vowel, but have not altered quotations for uniformity, so butô=butoh, and Ôno=Ohno.
[2] The information of this brief history can be found in Nanako Kurihara, "The Most Remote Thing in the Universe: Critical Analysis of Hijikata Tatsumi's Butoh Dance" (PhD diss., New York University, 1996), and Bruce Baird, "Butô and the Burden of History: Hijikata Tatsumi and Nihonjin" (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2005).
[3] See Gôda Nario, "'Hijikata butô': Sakuhin nôto" [Hijikata's Butô: Notes on the Dances],Pts. 1-6, *Asubesutokan Tsûshin 2* (Jan. 1987): 28-35; 5 (Oct. 1987): 38-43; 6 (Jan. 1988): 40-46; 7 (April 1988): 22-28; 8 (Aug. 1988): 26-32; and 10 (July 1989): 46-52.
[4] For more on the way that Hijikata's surrealistic writing style mirrors his equally surrealistic dance style, see my "Metaphorical Miscegenation in Memoirs: the Literary Activities of Hijikata Tatsumi," *Hermenuetical Strategies: Methods of Interpretation in the Study of Japanese Literature, PAJLS 5* (Summer 2004): 369-385.
[5] For more on the layered surrealistic choreography of butô, see my "Structureless in Structure: the Choreographic Tectonics in Hijikata Tatsumi's Butô," in *Modern Japanese Theater and Performance*, ed. David Jortner, et al, 93-108 (Lanham MD: Lexington Books, 2006).