

Book Review

Hijikata Tatsumi and Butoh: Dancing in a Pool of Grey Grits, by Bruce Baird
(Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012)

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Japan's postwar art and performance scene is widely known for its innovations and avant-garde tendencies. Hijikata Tatsumi (1928–1986) who founded the dance-performance form butoh is among its most influential and inventive adherents. Hijikata was an enigmatic figure, a person who defied aesthetic and political conventions and created a movement style so radical that it too remains in some ways unknowable and butoh is often understood to be uncanny and disturbing. It is viscerally expressive and also challenging of conventions in the performing arts as a statement against modern dance. It is a physicalised protest to the capitalist ordering of bodies in early postwar Japan and a mode of corporeal thinking about existence and the human spirit. It draws on memories of place and culture while also prefiguring ideas of intersubjectivity and ecological systems linking artistic expression to environmental awareness. It is both a comment on and an extension of reality. As Miryam Sas so elegantly writes: '*Butô* appeals to a transcendent return and also, at other moments, acknowledges the impossibility of such a return. In this sense, the performance of *butô* has the structure of a text, with its impossible invocation of and refusal of the real' (2011: 202). Interestingly, Butoh (or butô) has been widely disseminated around the world with companies and classes now seen on all continents. It is also popular among many younger artists who are perhaps drawn to its image-based corporeality and transgressive expressions of resistance.

While butoh has been the subject of several critical and/or practitioner focused studies in Japanese, English, and other languages, the question of what butoh is, and especially what Hijikata meant to create, remains of great interest. The task of writing about butoh poses the challenge of writing about something that intrinsically resists theorisation. Hijikata's work can be compared to that of Antonin Artaud whose insistence on a theatre of transformation and one that exceeds conventional forms of representation is like Hijikata's own artistic outlook.

As Bruce Baird writes in his definitive study of Hijikata's oeuvre: 'The world always exceeds language' (5). Baird's absorbing, deeply historicised and original study, *Hijikata Tatsumi and Butoh: Dancing in a Pool of Grey Grits* pits butoh against 1960s social conformity and alienation. The image of grey grits comes from a story by Argentinean Julio Cortázar who wrote of skin coarsely rubbing against small stones. Baird suggests that the key to understanding Hijikata's practice is a similar sensibility of friction and violence on the body. He argues for the need to acknowledge how oppositional forces and juxtapositions are characteristic of butoh; inflowing sensory and informational data, and a world of competition and conflict permeate butoh's bodily assault. Baird takes the Cortázar story that is cited in an essay on globalization by Arjun Appadurai to make a point about the similarity between capitalist regimentation of bodies in response to

globalization and Hijikata's "obsession with small differences" that alter a performance' (8). Hijikata's work was about the possibility of dance to go beyond its physical expressive limitations, so as to present physicality as an actuality and state of crisis. Baird shows how this was developed in his extensive engagement with the performance documentation and archive of Hijikata's work, much of which is now located at the Hijikata Tatsumi Archive, at Keio University in Tokyo. Baird's reconstruction and contextualisation of key performances by Hijikata form a major part of this book and his work on this will be of lasting significance.

The book is largely chronological. *Hijikata Tatsumi and Butoh* includes chapters tracing the development of butoh through Hijikata's arrival in Tokyo and early experiments in erotic dance and avant-garde 'crisis dance' in the late 1950s, and into a maturing of his ideas seen in the works he made in the 1960s and 1970s.

The chapter-length introduction explores the thematic context of butoh including discussion about the tumultuous conditions of 1960s Japan. Chapter two includes a detailed description of the two versions of the notorious work *Forbidden Colours* (Kinjiki) that Hijikata made with Ohno Kazuo and Ohno's son, Yoshito, in 1959. The chapter also includes discussion of the circle of critics and supporters who contributed to and debated Hijikata's work, including the well-known novelist and playwright Mishima Yukio, the butoh critic Gôda Nario, and the intellectual and translator Shibusawa Tatsuhiko. Chapter three follows the development of the Hijikata Tatsumi Dance Experience, a corps of young dancers under Hijikata's direction who performed in a number of key works including *Massur: A Story of Theatre that Sustains Passion* (Anma: Aiyoku o Sasaeru Gekijô no Hanashi, 1963) and *Rose Colour Dance: To Mr Shibusawa's House* (Barairo dansu: A la Maison de M. Civeçawa, 1965). Using documentation, including limura Takahiko's 'cine dance' films of the two performances, and analysis of writings, reviews, poster art, and interviews, Baird gives a comprehensive picture of the development and reception of these key works in Hijikata's early oeuvre. Baird states that the idea of athletic competition is useful in understanding the often prosaic nature of these works, which included movements based on sport such as baseball throws and running. He notes at the conclusion of the chapter that: 'Hijikata turned to the question of how to use competition, both between artists and between artists and the audience, as an organizing principle and as a way to strengthen his dance' (104). In chapter four, Baird takes his analysis of butoh to the level of the Japanese nation-state in an extended discussion of Hijikata's most complex work *Hijikata Tatsumi and Japanese People: Rebellion of the Body* (Hijikata Tatsumi to Nihonjin: Nikutai no Hanran, 1968). This piece is a central contribution to the butoh pantheon and a work of considerable dramaturgical complexity as shown in Baird's analysis. Hence, according to Baird, it 'can be read as a rebellion against the wider citizen-as-consumer/producer molding-activities of the state and industrial-entertainment complex' (105). Hosoe Eikô's famed *Kaimaitachi* photographs of Hijikata in the Tôhoku countryside are also discussed.

This chapter is a turning point for the book. After *Rebellion of the Body* Hijikata's practice gradually changed to focus on intensive and reclusive workshoping and the development of his choreographic method in its mature form. Baird's writing shifts from the focus on historical reconstructions of performances to interpreting the language and dramaturgy of butoh. Chapters five and six consider his last public performances and works that he choreographed for Ashikawa Yôko and other members of his group. The final chapter explores the performative writing and manifesto-like texts that Hijikata wrote—texts that changed considerably over time and are often difficult to understand. The book concludes with a short epilogue that takes the form of a summary and also an open-ended mediation on the unfinished and tenuous project of butoh. Baird concludes: 'Properly speaking, in so far as butoh has any essence at all, butoh is an art form that

demands that artists put themselves into continually new relationships and allow themselves to be invaded by others as a way to tirelessly search for actuality' (218).

Baird's reconstruction of Hijikata's performances is meticulous in this book. His work is supported by his own translations and discussion of writings by Hijikata as well as rare photographs. The significant contribution that Baird makes is to give an account of the historical development of Hijikata's butoh through showing where, when and what took place. At the same time, some of the analysis in the second part of the book is slightly limited by a smaller use of aesthetic discourses in the field. For this reason, I find benefit in reading this book alongside recent work by Sas (2011) and Jonathan Marshall (2013). However, this is not to detract from the great achievement of this book and Baird's definitive historical study will be essential reading for some time to come.

Works Cited

- Sas, Miryam. *Experimental Arts in Postwar Japan: Moments of Encounter, Engagement, and Imagined Return* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2011).
- Marshall, Jonathan. 'The World of the Neurology Ward: Hauntology and European Modernism *mal tourné* in Butoh', *TDR: The Drama Review*, 57.4 (2013): 60–85.

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