

Introduction

Butoh, a philosophy of perception to reach the other side of art

Putting into perspective the origin of the orientation of post-war art

During the second half of the XXth century, but through a process which has developed since the beginning of the century (futurist, Dadaist and surrealist), a new orientation in art initiates the rediscovery of the body's energy as a revelation of real time. We witness a process of collective creation based on meeting and exchange. The dividing line between the arts becomes indistinct. And that enables the circulation and synergy which will become the start of a new affirmation of the place of art in society. Art is a motor of ontological reflection on human and ethical life, and becomes the radical place where all types of resistance are expressed. A reform of open forms, the idea of a work of art fitting the economic policy of the art market. The multiplication of commentary on art becomes an important part of the work. Working on the ephemeral, seeking identity, regenerating the organic and biographical body of the artist, all that is signified by the immediacy of the creative act and of its production in space. The artist becomes his own tool. He is not only the subject of creation but the purpose of creation. He is no longer the artisan of a single technique, but axiomatically multi-disciplinary, an element of creation. There then appear individual but important acts revealing a new era.

The avant-garde is revealed above all in radical opposition to the realism of

representation and to the conventions of artistic tools.

°See in particular Futurism and its Manifestos (F.T. Marinetti) which marked a real break with the past in favour of a glorified technological world and whose dynamic political awareness, like painting, gave rise to abstraction, Dadaism and Surrealism. The fifties, turned upside down by the emergence of a genre and new concerns, marked the disfigurement of established order in the history of the arts. Artists of that period will now systematically call into question the properties and physical existence of a work

Lugio Fontana published in 1946 in Buenos Aires the “White Manifesto“ in which he advocated the abandonment of the use of known art forms in order to develop an art based on the unity of time and space. He discovered, following a chance manoeuvre, the force of suggestion of lacerations to the painting’s holder and integrated it into his work. The purpose, he said, was not to produce a painting but to make space, to create for art a new dimension, to attach it to the expanding cosmos, whose infinity goes beyond the flat pictorial surface. Accordingly, he literally slashed canvases with a knife, opening up to a third dimension, that of the depth of emptiness. Knowledge springing from experiment replaces the representation of a picture: to express feelings rather than to illustrate them, through action rather than pictures. That is the challenge made by artists in the second half of the century. Holes and slashing are like the act of possession of old, a presentation of violence, by gesture and by the gaps it produces.

In 1951, the film of Hans Namuth is presented at the MoMa (Museum of Modern

Art in New York), where Jackson Pollock dances round a canvas on the ground. He lets the paint run. It is diluted for the backing or thrown about according to the energy available at the time. This film is screened in Tokyo the same year. This screening had a direct impact on the painter Yoshihara Jiro, a future leader of the Gutai group, who said : «Let's finish with these substitutes which pile up in palaces, galleries, exhibitions, antique shops, let's chuck away these fossils; put them in the cemetery!» Already in 1954, Gutai was an “Association of Concrete Art” bringing together some fifteen artists and in 1955 it formed an action group for artists and the theatre in Kansai, a province to the south of Tokyo.

Post war Japan marked a new era in the country's history. In that period the artists reacted to the American presence in Japan, and at the same time to the stiff traditional structures and value systems. They also fed their imagination on all the components of a western, fascinating culture, and called for the discovery of their own cultural impression in the history of modernity. Kazuo Shiraga pressed his mud-soaked body on large canvases or, hanging from a rope, threw himself into the air, his arms and legs, like spatulas, were the chance colour of movement against props on the floor. All the senses were in play. The public itself was no longer just a passive observer of a work: at a vernissage, they stepped inside the area reserved for exhibits, visitors shouted out for paper screens to be torn, and they were puzzled, lost without their status of anonymous witness. They unwittingly became an active part of the work. Similarly, their senses were occupied individually and collectively in the immediacy of the moment.

Another Japanese celebrity, a soloist in the collective group, Tetsumi Kudo, condemned impotence, in all its forms, by emphasizing sexual urges in behaviour. He set up installations with huge phalluses hanging from the ceiling (in 1964 at the Festival of Free Expression-and “Instant Sperm” in 1968). That was the “revolutionary” trend of Japanese avant-garde in the 1950’s, and then in the 1960’s with groups such as *Zero Jigen*; *Dimension Zero*; *Kuro Hata*: Black Flag and *Kokuin*: the Shadow Word. These groups organized many street demonstrations and subversive happenings. Their leaders were regularly arrested and sometimes their actions were forbidden. There we are in a Japan which is crisis stricken and with a population which, in 1960, comes out onto the street to demonstrate against the renewal of security Treaties with the Americans. Also in those years of turmoil are developed the ideas that will give birth to Butoh. It is therefore not an isolated case, but the example of an artistic movement for socio-cultural resistance, apart from political groups.

Everything done by post-war artists in the modern world tends towards the universalisation of art, to escape from the specific influence of tradition, from the strait-jacket of the bourgeoisie and its aesthetic and technical conventions. Beyond the lasting nature of art and its commerce, it is the exploration of meaning and the senses and immediate, physical communication with the public which seem to end up as the final necessity. The dichotomy between actor and spectator is abolished .But also the dichotomy between art and life and later, in the extreme, between the symbolic and real body. There is a fabulous wild-fire effect on East and West in the same movement. And everyone pushes each other no longer to know deep down their geographical origin. The -ities and the

names of tendencies are to be found much later in history. There they are formalized, forever.

In Tao and Yi-King, the inspiration of the artists of the time, we find the idea of art as the Way to reach knowledge. In The Book of Thé we can find the idea of non-duality, the premise of all concepts which are going to turn the last decades upside down. No more dichotomies between creation and the creator. In the United States, John Cage was interested in the concepts of Zen Buddhism which he studied with Suzuki Daisuke. Inspired by Yi-King (The Book of Changes), he composed in 1951: “Music of Changes”. He discusses zen, reads Eckart-inspired passages, punctuating on purpose his lecture with long silences. From the top of a ladder, artists read their poems and Merce Cunningham together with other dancers occupy space. Like a collage of actions, the principles of pictorial art are moved to theatrical acts. All the combinations are explored: music, video, slides, film, poetry, dance, radio—whose common denominator is putting side by side the same elements in the same place. Objects are not signed; a work is no longer produced. Spontaneous circulation between the artist and the freedom of expression of his art. The direct and indirect pupils of John Cage (Claes Oldenbourg, Allan Kaprow, George Brecht or Dick Higgins) promote the art manifestations which are made in garages, flats or other incongruous places. The meetings are like an improvised party, like rites which are reminiscent of the dialectic of the sacred and the secular. For the recognized artists of the time, the meeting with the East opens the flood gates of creative infinity. Denouncing “Western colonialism” in the face of knowledge of other cultures, it will generate new views and reflections on the world. John Cage also refers to

indetermination, to chance and to the ephemeral which are subject to the laws of life. Only living for the present, the separation of hierarchy and chronology. The break with one's origins, with the past means a world outside history, hanging in the air and innocent.

For the New York artists of the 1950's, the creative urge expressed itself in two opposite tendencies : expressionism and zen; on the one hand, the need to push the body to its limits, in the turmoil of the ego, on the other the desire for the void, effacing the ego to make silence visible.

In 1961, in the Pop Art period, the Fluxus movement was born. This movement, inspired by Dadaism, aimed at freeing the individual from any form of alienation, and in particular from brain washing by television. *It was the melting of pot nationalities, tendencies and various artistic media*, as much as from dissimilar artists. Its members, Wolf Vostel and Nam Jun Paik, introduced the electronic image as an artistic medium. In 1963 they had video art recognized, and it became a counter power in the word of the small screen.

“Body Art” was also born in the 1960's and in it the body of the artist is the ultimate datum of creation and of the creative desire. It is a back up and a means of expression. It is an attempt at non-verbal communication for family and religious morality, and stresses the importance of social rituals. Transvestite art is one of the expressions of Body Art. It is the very evocation of the indefinite, of identity problems, but also of movement, of the ephemeral and of metamorphosis, the subject which is the foundation of Butoh.

In France, a perfect illustration of these ideas is Yves Klein and his happenings. In 1958 he extended an invitation, at the Iris Clert gallery, to the vernissage of empty walls painted white. This was the presentation of the concept of the void being decontaminated by the gaze. Place and time are ushered in. It was the major achievement of Yves Klein, who was also impregnated with far eastern philosophy and practices. The symbolic transfer to notions of energy and the void is a screen for questioning the essence of the real being and its values. The void is proposed as a moral philosophy.

It is not possible to leave out Jerzy Grotowski, who was an historic character in the theatre world. He was active on avant-garde ideas in Eastern Europe. He created in 1959 the theatre Laboratory in Poland; it was better known as The Poor Theatre. It was a School/theatre for experimental research on the nature of acting. There one experienced that acting was not an aim in itself, after a deep revision of the psychological, social and cultural questions. And one learned that total commitment demanded, like Artaud, "cruelty towards oneself". Without any superfluous scenery, Grotowski concentrated his research on a pedagogy of the "zero active" presence of the actor's being, in order to introduce oneself without cheating as the very incarnation of the character from within and to enter the musical score with an assumed truth.

The Notion of Performance

«Performance» was not coined by a single author. It is a field promoted with gusto and complicity, in each of the media under exploration, and in all the

countries where avant-garde cultural activity is developed.

Performance is well and truly the word to which Butoh refers when it speaks of stage representations. Contrary to happenings and to actions mentioned above, the individual intervention, whether verbal, multimedia, musical or danced, replaces the public in its role of spectator, for whom sociological or psychic forces are activated. The word “performance” means “accomplishment”. Public accomplishment, as a work. One can say that performance is born from the meeting of all the artistic codes and from their decomposition. It is where theatricality can exist without the theatre and ”picturality” without pictures.

Performance, as it is understood at the beginning of the 1970’s, was already conceived perhaps as the vision of numerous forerunners, which, from the beginning of the XXth century, aspire to become an art which desecrates the arts of the past, and contribute to the change of the whole social and political system

The actions of Dadaism, the numerous transversal and surrealist creations are the subject of all the first art scandals of the century. And Isadora Duncan was one of them. But at the rhythm of the digestive system of history, time shakes up the processes and runs them together, and the decades, punctuated by the great wars, recall the messages with the movements of seismic resistance of counter power. It ends with the integration of change and the globalization of conscience.

It is important to remember that this word conveys an aspect of resistance to so

called bourgeois culture. The performer is a rebel, unruly, expressing his individual freedom. He refuses the principles of complete and fixed work. It is why his action can vary, change from one place to another and from one time to another, and thus show the fruit of experience. *It is an attitude to life, as much in the aesthetic domain as in the political.* We are right in the counter cultural energies of the 1960's and its declarations, in which the artists accuse society of making the arts a means of prestige and not the workplace for human communication.

Conclusion

Yesterday, we had the holocaust, Hiroshima and Nagasaki. We also had the Korean War, and then Vietnam. America was traumatized and was sinking. In the world there was a strong wave of widespread rebellion in Western countries and Japan. Butoh was part of this global movement of identity. Travelling through the history of the last few decades, we come across countries, cultures, names, works, actions and significant ideologies. They are political and apolitical. The chronology and location of the birth of these intellectual concepts are, in fact, difficult to pinpoint because they were so widespread. What is important to remember is that the synergy between individuals, their declarations and their actions, is the essential engine of experimental arts creation. Without this dynamism, without these meetings and thinkers, without the tradition and cultural heritage of each artist, there would doubtless be no fertile ground for avant-gardism. The example set by these avant-garde movements confirms above all that it is possible to think "political" without

necessarily belonging to a political group. That brings us back to one of the fundamental teachings of Butoh: if there is no separation between art and life, it is because life is the consummate art of constant training. Because life is an art of being oneself, belonging to others, belonging to the world, because art generates politics, at the most noble level. It is perhaps, at the spiritual level, a concern for the world, the mirror of its propulsion, through an act of resistance, into creation.

Each generation is its trustee and guarantor.

II - Eroticism of the individual in the world : Butoh or the art of non-dance

In my presentation of the context of Butoh's formation, I have cited on purpose more names of plastic art modelers or performers than of dancers. It was because, in general, Butoh actors had broken with Western forms which did not correspond to their own awareness of morphology, specifically Japanese morphology. That was even if they had sometimes studied classical and modern dance. Every Butoh method will depend on the exploration of these differences in order to highlight the "cultural body". In the very beginning, many modelers and actors had come to the first Butoh performances. We could see that the introduction of the body and the subject matter went beyond the question of divisions between artistic tools to encompass the very essence of creation. When Ohno Kazuo, one of the forerunners of Butoh, spoke of a painting, he spoke of the artist's "butoh". In his mouth, the word Butoh became a generic term to speak of an essence of the being in motion, of a consciousness of one's origins in the act of creation. He did not mean a style or an exterior form.

Time has not significantly marked Butoh which, in the last four decades, has become more formal and stronger. It never fails to attract the attention of artists, academics and new audiences. Tatsumi Hijikata, *Ankoku Butoh, Dance of Shadows*, master, hoped that Butoh would become a philosophy more than a technique or a style of dance.

Butoh has not only survived the years of generalized turmoil, but succeeded in establishing the main heads of a reflection which go beyond dance and the special nature of Japan.

Butoh asks a whole set of essential questions which are free from social convention and escape the latest fashion. Hijikata wrote: “a preconceived dance made to be shown off has no interest. Dance must be absurd... I want to show aspects of life which are not usually seen, like for example what happens between two fingers”. (“Shades of Darkness” p.185)

There are some who will demonstrate that Butoh provides the basis for body therapy. This idea is one of those which posit that every art is therapeutic, because it allows access to the inner being and the subconscious. It is possible to renew ad infinitum therapeutic proposals, but it seems more interesting to reply to the visionary proposal of Hijikata which, after the first years of provocation and subversive action, has fabricated the keys of a new language, made up of all the dimensions of what exists, right up to the sensitive layers of the flesh, and reaches the absence of estrangement which opens the way to freedom.

It is not therefore a question of «doing» dance, but of being acted on by what is not revealed at the outset: «To succeed in being moved rather than to move oneself, not to become something, but to become nothing, a place full of nothingness, ready to leap towards another dimension». No longer then a distinction between object and subject: I do not dance the right side, I am the right side. I do not dance, I am the dance, what is danced, what is dancing, I am space and time and everything there is. The union of the tax collector, payer of taxes and tax collection are the three factors of knowledge, namely the definition of the absolute (or of God) for all the mystical traditions of the world (from Maimonides to Buddha, from Eckart to Ibn Erabi or the Upanishads).

A dance of non-dance is born of this situation for it is not forced to make a representation, an expression or a gymnastic movement but to renew worlds for themselves, through linkages between all the fields of perception which have their intrinsic home in the flesh. And the polarities permit a transformation from which every manifestation originates. In “Erotic Meditations” Marc Alain Ouaknin, extends the thinking of Levinas : “The secret appears without appearing, it appears in ambiguity (...) The erotic nature of the being in the world, objects and people, is sometimes inherent in the world itself, that is objects and people themselves have that ambiguous dimension (visible/invisible) which makes possible a radical manifestation and demonstration: “The phenomenology of Eros installs metaphysics in movement and moving towards transcendence. But transcendence does not mean the appropriation of what is, but its respect. Truth, like respect of the individual – there we have metaphysical truth.” For Kazuo Ohno, who is a poet, the body is

necessarily erotic because it was born of a sexual act. Through a mysterious logic, the egg will choose only one spermatozoid out of millions, to combine and impregnate to the detriment of all the others. The history of this mad rush to reach the egg, then the chance selection, highlights as much life as the death of millions of others, whose bodies keep the secret. And so, the body is essentially an erotic and criminal substance: “Butoh is a dead body, standing in despair” (Hijikata). Many major themes of Butoh meet up with this search for one’s origins, from the polarities: life/death, infinitely/small, infinitely/big, ugliness/beauty, masculine/feminine, innocence, childhood, the mother, the foetus, the cosmos shade/light. Butoh, writes T. Hijikata, is shadow, is light, is a mixture of the two. And the ugly is made beautiful, the dark is made light by both, a plethora of metamorphoses. So many themes, paradoxically poetic, will enrich the imaginary world and the methods by which Butoh will lay its foundations. And to start weaving the web of creation, there is no fixed dual relationship, but tenuous links between the different dimensions where these themes are entered. For example: shade and light in contact with the experience of taste create the link darkness/taste: to eat a sweet in the dark for Hijikata makes it better than eating it when it is light.

The sense of taste without the sense of vision plunges the individual into infinite sensory delight; the individual and taste melting into darkness is essentially a dance. This proposal, an outline of the training of the conscience in Butoh’s teaching, constitutes but one of the many cells that drive the dance. To link up with it does not mean to show it or to illustrate it. All the exercises are first and foremost a test for the senses. The body is used to responding to the outside,

social world, and «from its birth is house-trained to respond to specific social schemes. For dance to succeed, these schemes, anchored deep down in one's being, had to be radically destroyed».

°"From being jealous of a dog's vein"

To ensure that the vibrations and memory of the flesh's mass is covered, the body must be tested, pushed to the limit, cornered, shaken. And so the body is tested to the limit by the paradoxes and disorders of life:"Put your ears closer to your knees, to hear better; feel that your wrist is someone else's; see without using your eyes, but with your body having a thousand eyes, or dance only with your eyes, or your tongue. For each tiny part of the body contains the whole body, and no habitually special part, particularly the eyes or the mouth, is different from another, from a toe or sexual organ .Being a flower which drinks the sun's rays – the human being is not more important than plant life, the whole of creation, of life in all its dimensions, of ghosts and spirits, of memory, whether it be individual, collective or ancestral. A world without any differentiation, without duality, without judgment. Being in the world of perception and not mental logic, like a baby.... Butoh space-time is quintessentially spiritual, a dedication to the other side of daily life. Like a moment of ecstasy, a sort of trance lit up by sub-conscious flashes which provoke, without butoh-ka knowing, a grotesque, absurd, discordant emptiness, which can suddenly be incomparably beautiful. The body stiffens, contracts or unbends abolishing all the spatial limits to leave real time to go back to original time, to creative infinity. And then there emerge different memories which take

hold of the flesh. The images feeding the sensations give body to movement. Ohno wrote: «I do not think that the body is really transformed, except when it experiences consciousness of life and death. That is why, when I try to confirm my existence, I must of necessity try to trace my failing memory back to my mother's womb where I was born. I try to reintegrate all the weight and bewilderment of my whole body. That is my attitude to life where dance originated". "Not being able to help, in any way whatsoever, in the creation of the world, I fell on my back, feet skywards, upside down.»

Speech is an important vector of perception in Butoh. It is a vocalization of what is suggested between the lines, a web woven between the shades, the language of inter corporeity. And Dada or surrealist images constitute a sort of counter power of domesticated logic. So, to arouse the cells of the body, a flood of words, of images, or the memory of childhood haunts in everyone, riddles the flesh, physically, mentally, cosmically alike. To do this, according to the teaching of Hijikata, and to his writings, we favour the use of onomatopoeias. This sound universe is particularly well developed in the Japanese language. Onomatopoeias lend themselves to obtaining an impression of the real thing and to awakening corporal sensation.

There are several ways for rain to fall. The onomatopoeia preceding the verb will set the tone. Fine rain makes the sound tchito-tchito; the shower goes zaa-zaa ; and Hijikata poetically and musically suggests : «the sound of the silk worms which tirelessly munch the mulberry leaves make the sound jyari-jyari-jyari ; the chomping of the teeth goes giri-giri ; and while the silk worms chew,

there is sound synchronisation with the man who sleeps grinding his teeth... Everything is linked. If it was always linked in life, as here, it would perhaps not be necessary to train for dance», Hijikata proposes. And to fix firmly these impressions throughout the body, no mirror will ever make the inner confrontation of the dance deviate. Ohno Kazuo tells the students time and time again that their look must be like the dead eye of the fish. Sight is moreover peripheral and unfocused. For Hijikata, the “turned-up” eyes technique was a method which generated a loss of guide marks. The pupils come and go making the whites see like an empty screen, unsteady, reminiscent also of a baby’s look. Absence/presence, appearance/disappearance. Butoh-ka is dazzled by the eye exercise and suffers a loss of feeling of material space in favour of a re-creation of space, in its many forms, breaking with the clear perception of the inside and of the outside. But Ohno did not follow this technique. To study Butoh one had«to empty the mind. To be aware of one’s usual attitude, of ordinary day to day movements. » To do that, he said, a place must already exist in you and this indescribable place cannot be taught by me. Yoshito Ohno, his son, says that his father was so structurally passionate about dance, so impregnated with his imaginary world that one rainy day he happened to propose to his physical education students to change themselves into frogs. No doubt, as Nietzsche wrote a century earlier, “Only in the dance I know how to speak the parable of the highest things.”^o

^o”Kazuo Ohno’s world from without and within

^oThe tomb song from-“Thus Spoke Zarathustra”

EPILOGUE

A few generations later.....

With distance, it is interesting to note that the foundations of Butoh are universal. They are universal because identity awareness induces one to claim and to work on one's special characteristics without making any concessions to Western universality, which sacrifices difference in favour of "sameness". One could have believed therefore that Butoh is a Japanese style, that it is nationalist, that it is religious or sectarian, that it is a form of aesthetics. Butoh is certainly linked to a specific cultural environment, as it is to the individuals who have fashioned it starting from their own language and history in a given context. But it is evident that methods, irrational and poetic evocations, have impregnated creative and intellectual workers the world over. And new generations still study it. Because it is not a question of appearing but of being, not of style but of life. A phenomenological ontology. More than dance, an "other side dance", a "non-dance", eroticism of the individual in the world.

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