

Butoh Encounters: From 2004 to 2014

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Photo: Butoh Company Kiraza before the Performance “Catch the Carp” at Gojo Rakuen in Kyoto, 2009. The Writer, Caitlin Coker, is the one in the middle, the fourth from the right. We were jokingly practicing our “carp faces.”

My First Encounter with Butoh in Japan, 2004

After studying modern dance and dance anthropology during university, I studied abroad in Tokyo for the first time and decided to try my hand at a brief ethnography of contemporary dance- namely, to pick up on the urban culture around me as well as conducting participant observation of movement classes, watching performances, and interviewing artists. The end idea was to see how the worlds I saw on stage related to the everyday world I saw on the streets. First, I was astonished at the kindness of the Japanese dancers, so many of whom were willing to meet and talk with me, even though I was some university student who emailed them out of the blue, and they were quite established artists. The artists who made the largest impression on me at that time were Shinonome Butoh, a group of three female Butoh artists- named Kawamoto Yuko, Katata Chisato, and Shimada Asuka- who were apprentices of the Butoh artist Waguri Yukio. Waguri performed Butoh with Hijikata, who could be regarded as the man who started Butoh performance in the late 50’s and 60’s in Japan. The Butoh I saw by

Shinonome Butoh shattered my preconceived notions of what dance could be and opened my eyes to different ways of moving and existing.



Photo: Shinonome Butoh, Courtesy of Katata Chisato

I saw them listed on a flier and went to see them by myself in a place of Tokyo that I had never been before. (Now I know that I stumbled upon Show-Up Omiya Gekijo, a semi-legendary strip club that closed in 2005) I expected their Butoh to have some political message or even a story, or characters, and I expected it to be performed in a regular theater. When I arrived at the theater, it was a strip club, and the man at the door seemed shocked that some 19-year-old petite white girl (me), by herself, was insisted on being admitted. I could not yet speak Japanese that well, and I pointed to the picture of Shinonome Butoh and said “I want to see this” in Japanese. They took my 6000 yen and let me in, and I went into a room with about 20 stiff, old chairs and about 15 middle to old-aged men quietly sitting in them, positioned around a T-shaped stage, by which I mean a catwalk with a

stage at the base of it. The show began, and I waited through routines by the usual strippers to see Shinonome Butoh perform. It was the classical strip show format- 3 songs, the beginning being very slow, and the end having lots of posing. At the tender age of 19, I couldn't handle seeing a lot of naked women, so I took a break in the corridor, where I then accidentally found a book on hana-densha- the art of women putting things into their vaginas. Bottles into vaginas, blowing bubbles from vaginas, ping pong balls popping out from vaginas- I was in a double shock, and chose the less abrasive sight of women stripping in the theater.



Photo: Outside of Show Up Omiya Gekijo in Tokyo

The three women of Shinonome Butoh came out, and I will never forget their movement. The following is an excerpt from the notes I wrote afterwards:

The curtain opened to reveal Kawamoto standing absolutely still in the darkness of upstage center. She was wearing all black, revealing only her painted-white stomach and face. Her whole body and face were tensed, and her stomach looked knotted in contrast to the smooth and sensuous

stomachs of the performers before her. She squinted into the audience, looking straight through it. Her hair pulled back into a single, long ponytail, she slowly took one stepped forward into a spotlight, still squinting, and pantomimed brushing her teeth. Next, her body broke down into a series of locking; she isolated each part of her body as it folded inward and downward. And then she rose up again. It looked like the locking that hip hop dancers do when they perform “the robot,” and Kawamoto did look like a robot. But she looked more like a broken doll, due to her static facial expression. She exhibited a fastidious control over each muscle.

Next, out came Katata, the tallest and thinnest of the group, in a long, simple dress. She was holding one hand in the air and walking towards it, like she was searching for something. She walked knock-kneed as she stepped onto feebly turned-in feet. Her hands articulated into claws as her movements turned bolder. She mimed putting on make-up while looking into a mirror, and her face became vapidly giddy. Next, she stepped back, as if she was stepping on and around broken glass. She spiraled her body as she tried to catch something elusive in the air.

Often, when one performer was doing a solo in the front, the other two members of the company would do silly play-work in the back. When Katata was dancing downstage, Kawamoto and Shimada were tip-toeing from one side of the stage to the other, in a very cartoonish way. Before this, they clapped their hands and stomped their feet rhythmically. Katata and Shiwamada playfully ran towards each other in the upstage area, while Kawamoto did a serious and compelling solo downstage. One of the performers, I assume Shiwamada, came onstage with a plastic bag over her head, a sweater over her legs, and a smiling woman’s face painted on her stomach. She simply entered from stage left, moved her stomach slightly, and exited stage right.

Their controlled movements were so slow that they were inhuman. Then, they would break down, and began moving more and more quickly; traveling from careful control to unbridled chaos. It looked like they were

killing their bodies and shedding them in order to take up other forms. They shed their human forms and donned wraith-like facial expressions and inhuman movements.

I had no idea what they were representing, because they constantly changed from one being and into the other. But it all looked logical somehow. At times, they only stared at the audience, perhaps inviting the audience to look at themselves.

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After the performance, I mulled around in the middle room between the performance area and the entrance, waiting to possibly meet Shinonome Butoh. I walked up to one of the men working the lobby.

In broken Japanese, I said, "Good evening. What time tonight will there be more Shinonome Butoh?" The young man with shoulder-length black hair smiled and said, "They will be going on again in forty-five minutes," in clear English. That's the thing about Tokyo. Everybody here speaks better English than I speak Japanese. "Do you like Shinonome Butoh?" he asked.

"Yes, I think they are amazing. I don't really understand something though- the audience seemed a little confused by their performance. Is it normal for Butoh dancers to perform in strip clubs?"

"They are just here to see pussy. It's a very unusual case to put Butoh dancers and strippers in the same shows, and most of the bars around here never do that. But here, it is tradition. In the old days, the Butoh people didn't have any place to show, so they came here. Kim Itoh and his partner danced in strip clubs. Kim Itoh, you know, a famous Butoh dancer, was the manager of this club in the 1980's, and he attract a lot of Butoh dancers to dance here," he explained.

Butoh dancers are drawn to Show-Uppu, because of its history. "Wow, that's really interesting," I said, figuring out how I could ask this guy more questions without becoming an annoyance. "What's your name?"

"Oh, My name is M-----."

“M-----? I’m Caitlin. Nice to meet you,”

“Would you like to meet the Shinonome?” he asked.

“That would be so great. I don’t want to cause you any trouble, though.”

“Oh, no trouble at all. They would be happy to know they have a fan tonight,” he said.

M----- went to the backstage area and returned with the members of Shinonome Butoh. They were wearing robes and white make-up, each with a cigarette in one hand and a bottle of cold green tea in the other. M---- introduced us, and I congratulated them on an excellent performance.

“What was it about?” I asked, directing my question to all three of them. Katata answered, since her English was the best in the group. I wished that I had studied more Japanese vocabulary for this very instance.

“Eh?” Katata said. “What ... it about?”

“Umm... well, what did your dance mean?” I asked.

“It’s sacred,” Katata said. I later realized that she might have said, “It’s secret.”

It was obvious that Katata wanted to say something else, but she couldn’t flesh it out in English. She said something in Japanese to M-----, and he repeated it in English.

“They know the audience is not typical, so they just wanted to introduce Butoh,” he said. They might have been trying to do this by contrasting the serious moments upstage with the silly acts upstage. “They want to tell the audience ‘hey, take it easy,’” he said. “So, they did some funny.”

“What do you think about while you dance?” I asked, trying to find another intelligible and open-ended question.

“Ehhh toh, I think about crazy girls sometimes,” Katata answered. “Sometimes like from a forest.”

Shiwamada chimed in. “I think to be sometimes a dog or other strange animal. But, eh, always change my body so that it is not only form,” she said.

Kawamoto had not said anything yet, but the conversation had already reached the point where it would be rude to detain them any longer. Also, I could not think of a simple question to ask, my head too busy with the possibilities of what they had told me and what I had seen. I took a seat in the audience and waited for them to perform again.

#### Reflecting on 2004 in 2014

On this day, I saw something that would change how I viewed Butoh, dance, and bodies forever- human beings do not have a set identity or an unchanging form. We are perpetually becoming and transforming. This transformation is not as an independent entity, but always together with, and as one part of something bigger. This is true onstage, this is true of the audience, and this is true in everyday life.

For example, say that onstage I choose to become a swan who cannot fly but longs to.



Photo: Caitlin Coker Performing on May 22, 2014 at Super Deluxe, Tokyo.

Communicating to the audience “I am a bird” or “I cannot fly” is not important. Rather, the qualities of the sometimes elegant swish, and sometimes spasmodic flapping of the wings, the clumsiness of the legs that just seem like dead weight on a body that cannot fly. There is the heaviness of the bottom and yet the quick upward contraction in the diaphragm, trying to pull the body upwards into flight. These are qualities that come from the idea of a bird that cannot fly, but can also call forth other memories and identities. Personally, I remember all of the chickens,



ducks, geese that I hatched out of eggs, fed, and chased around the yard as a child in South Carolina.



Photo: Caitlin Coker as a silkworm who longs to fly. Photo by Okubo Keiji, Costume by Ohno Chie, Makeup by Shidahara Satoko. January, 2014.

In that performance ten years ago in Tokyo, and in the performances since then, I also see, or imagine, accumulated layers of physical history. From their experiences, Katata understands what it is like to be a crazy girl, what it is like to be in the forest- rather than representing it, she is becoming it, living it, onstage. The next time I saw Katata perform, I was amazed out how compact she could make her body by sitting in a kind of obasan suwari, which means “old woman

style of sitting.” It is where one’s buttocks is on the floor, in between the tops of one’s ankles, which are also resting on the floor. The way the legs become compactly gathered on top of the floor is shown in the picture of me dancing in the flower dress. I had never seen this type of sitting studying jazz and modern dance in the US, and I couldn’t do it at the time. However, after living in Japan, sitting on tatami floors and using the old style Japanese toilet, my legs began to fold this way from performing the movements of everyday life. Furthermore, I found a picture of myself as a toddler, my hair in disarray and my legs folded in this very same manner. I understood that the body has a physical memory, a history, as well as constantly being reshaped through daily life.



Photo: Caitlin Coker performing in April, 2014 at Urbanguild, Kyoto. Courtesy of Mimura Hiroshi



Photo: Caitlin Coker performing in March 2014 at Blue Eyes, Kyoto. Courtesy of Fujita Kai

In 2004, I saw Butoh for the first time, and have been learning, dancing, and watching it ever since. However, I feel like I am constantly rediscovering Butoh, dance and the body in the field by observing and asking about others' experiences, as well as dancing and experiencing with them.

Photo: Noso Performance by Atashi Yoshiko at Factory Garden in Kyoto, 2009. Left, Caitlin Coker; Right, Atashi Yoshiko. Courtesy of Fujisaki Kentaro.

