

BUTOH

Duet for Dancer and Photographer

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Butoh, the Japanese dance form, has been widely photographed since its inception in 1959, when the first performance emerged from the collaboration between Kazuo Ohno (1907–2010) and Tatsumi Hijikata (1928–1986). It has attracted photographers with its strong visual aesthetics and the physical appearance of dancers' well-trained bodies. The dancers welcomed the collaboration with photographers, which resulted in the creation of many Butoh photograph albums. There is an interesting statement reappearing in many Butoh photographers' testimonies noting that the act of taking pictures places them closer to the dance. They often claim that they are themselves part of the Butoh dance. The photographers' creative involvement has been recognized and appreciated by Kazuo Ohno for many years, and he often collaborated with the French photographer Nourit Masson-Sékiné. He would invite her to take photographs during the rehearsals in his studio, allowing the clicking sound of the camera to become his guide on whether the inner focus in his dance was sustained.

However, this creative duet between a Butoh dancer and a photographer has not received much attention in view of the artists' immediate collaboration, and the dance and photographs have been mostly discussed as separate artworks. Here I am offering a closer look at the dancer-photographer relationship by describing my act of photographing several Butoh performers and sketching reflections on this process. This will help present the duet in a new light, where a photographer does not only offer a technical skill and a visual interpretation of a dance (according to his style, art-history knowledge, and so on) but first and foremost takes part in creating a new event and is an active participant rather than just an observer.

I first came across Butoh in Australia in 2000. Having previously studied mainly "classical" theatre, Butoh seemed fresh, new, and challenging, with dancers' grotesque bodies treating taboo subjects such as sex, death, and homosexuality. Following the advice of a writer and theatre director Lee Chee Keng, who said that "Butoh is an art that is understood primarily through practice,"¹ I took Butoh workshops, mainly with Daisuke Yoshimoto, in order to experience the dance myself. I was disappointed to discover that I felt uncomfortable dancing Butoh, which led me to conclude that the body was not my medium of expression. However, just watching Butoh

dancers was not enough, and I had a strong urge to “do something” with the form. Photography became my choice and, as the Butoh photographer Laurencine Lot described her need for photographing the dance, I too became hungry to capture images of Butoh dancers.² I started by photographing performances and then moved on to independent photography projects, in which I would choose a location and ask dancers to improvise for the camera. This kind of practice was more than just being in the audience at a theatre and resulted in my engagement in the performance in a different way from when I danced or just observed dance.

As a Butoh researcher and a photographer, I have explored the photographic act as a site-specific performance, prompted by Butoh dancer Min Tanaka’s claim about the embodied relationship between a performer and surrounding environment; he said: “I don’t dance in the place, but I am the place.”³ The projects presented here were conducted in London in 2007 and 2008: the first one in the Westminster underground station with Yuko Kawamoto and Tadashi Endo, the second in Abney Park Cemetery with the same dancers, and the third in the National Gallery with Katsura Kan and Gabriella Daris. The projects set out to explore photographically the environmental influences on the collaborative act between a photographer and a performer. They aimed at exploring both contrasting qualities and a thematic unity of Butoh and the surroundings. Dancers were placed in a public space where live performances are not usually seen. The emphasis was placed equally on creating stills as final products as well as on the process of photographing the experience.

THE WESTMINSTER PROJECT

The *Westminster Project* was a collaboration between myself and Butoh dancers Tadashi Endo and Yuko Kawamoto. Tadashi Endo is the head of the Butoh-Centrum MAMU in Göttingen, Germany, the artistic director of the MAMU Festivals in Germany and Japan, and the head and chief choreographer of the MAMU Dance Theatre. He had been collaborating with Kazuo Ohno since 1989. Yuko Kawamoto is a co-founder of Shinonome Butoh Group (1999), and is currently based in Tokyo, Japan. As the initiator of the project, I chose the location for the photographic shoot and asked dancers to improvise for this photographic act.

I wanted to contrast Butoh’s slow movement with urban London life. Westminster station is a place with a cold, industrial appearance, built in stainless steel. The aim was to place the dancers in a difficult environment in the sense that its aesthetics are based on sterile and impersonal visual qualities, which do not directly correspond with the aesthetics of Butoh dance. Furthermore, Westminster station is not conducive to any artistic performance on a purely practical level. It is a place where many people pass but do not gather to experience something together. They constitute a big mass but each element of it is a separate individual with his or her own life, not related to the rest. Individuals “meet” (pass by) at this public place only to catch a train. The choice of the location was inspired by the sound of heels hitting the ground at London’s St. Paul’s station at 8:30 A.M., which expressed not only the vast numbers of people during the morning rush hour at the station but also the speed of Londoners’ lives. The sound of heels was very dominant, and what

was significant was the lack of voices. This depersonalized the space and objectified both the space and the people.

I was allowed to photograph at Westminster station in the late evening to avoid crowds. When I was setting up the camera, I was aware of people looking at us with curiosity, especially at Tadashi who was wearing a traditional Japanese red kimono (Yuko was wearing a long white dress). When I started looking through the camera my perspective changed completely; the space around me consisted only of my camera, the dancers, and myself. The dance began.

Yuko and Tadashi started dancing by the stairs. Next to them were escalators, which passersby chose to use. However, one lady took “the dancers’ stairs” to get down, not seeing them at the bottom. She looked a bit confused, and I thought it was a good moment to capture. Something unpredictable had happened that corresponded well with the idea of Butoh at the station. I felt it was an extremely interesting encounter: the reality of the fast-paced everyday life and the slow movements of Butoh. After a while, I understood that the lady was waiting for some sign from me to let her know when she could pass by without interrupting the photographing. She did not know she was already in the frame.

At some point during the photographing, Yuko started taking off the top of her dress. I felt it was another amazing contrast: her naked body and the steel scenery of the station; the body as a “living object” marked by individual experiences and qualities confronted with the stainless steel as a “dead object,” clear and perfect but somehow empty.

THE CEMETERY PROJECT

The *Cemetery Project* immediately followed the *Westminster Project*. Abney Park Cemetery is an unkempt cemetery, used by people as a park where families come with their children or walk their dogs. The exact spot for the dancers’ improvisation was not specified until we arrived at the cemetery. In the end the shoot took place firstly around graveyards and then next to a disused chapel.

The primary motivation for this project was to contrast the experience of photographing at Westminster station with the experience of photographing in a more natural environment, where Butoh conceptually belongs. Abney Park Cemetery was my choice because of its wild, exuberant nature. There is little human control seen in this cemetery, as if the place belonged to, or was left to be managed by, the dead. It reflected my thoughts about death in relation to Butoh, which I think of as something dynamic—in a way, “lively.” The cemetery seemed like a natural choice for Butoh considering its relationship to death. Hijikata once said:

To make gestures of the dead, to die again, to make the dead re-enact once more their deaths in their entirety—these are what I want to experience within me. A person who has died once can die over and over again within

me. Moreover, I've often said although I'm not acquainted with Death, Death knows me.⁴

Taking photographs at the cemetery provided the creative potential to realize Hijikata's notion of renewed dying: for me, by confronting my Catholic background, which disapproves of dancers performing on graves, and for dancers, by embodying the spirits of absent corpses. Here, the Butoh ideas of death influenced the thematic location unlike the first shoot, which was meant to create a purposeful tension between the Butoh practice and the location.

After the photo shoot, Yuko said that at some point she had accidentally stepped into a partly open grave. I felt this was very close to the Butoh spirit. This made me think of the expression "to be with one foot in the grave," meaning to nearly die. I felt that this metaphor described the nature of the relationship established between our experience and the surrounding space of the cemetery; like Hijikata, we "shook hands with the dead."

Tadashi and Yuko first danced close to graves, walking slowly through wild bushes. I set up the camera in one position, but I had to move together with it from time to time to follow the dancers. They began walking and sitting on the graves, which, because of my Catholic upbringing, I would normally find upsetting, or at least inappropriate. Instead, I was focused on photographing.

THE GALLERY PROJECT

The *Gallery Project* was realized in the National Gallery in collaboration with Butoh dancer Katsura Kan. He belongs to the first generation of Butoh dancers and has been performing this dance since 1979. Prior to that, he studied Noh theatre with master Hirota (Kongoh School). Currently he leads the research into Butoh-Beckett notation, a working method that fuses the writings of the Irish playwright and Hijikata's Butoh-fu, a choreographic notation system. During the photo shoot he was accompanied by his dancing partner Gabriella Daris.

The project again set out to put the Butoh dancer in a demanding environment. The National Gallery is a place imbued with such a strong cultural inheritance that any other art form needs to defend its individual presence there. Katsura Kan reflected on the project afterwards: "I just recall myself asking what my body said. I heard many screams and actual noise as too many drawings were together, almost like a zoo." I found it interesting to juxtapose Butoh with the seventeenth century paintings. My choice was not dictated by knowledge of the history of art; it was made on a visual basis. Therefore I did not research any particular paintings, the stories behind them, their historical and cultural context, or the painters. I selected the collection in the National Gallery which, in my view, offered new insight when confronted with a Butoh dancer. I was particularly interested in placing Katsura Kan in front of *Perseus Turning Phineas to Stone* (Luca Giordano, early 1680s) because of its cruelty and directness. The size of the painting, 2.85 x 3.66 m. (approximately, 112 x 144 in.) also adds to the impressiveness of the image. By juxtaposing Butoh with these paint-

ings I had in mind both the contrasts as well as similarities: Butoh, an avant-garde dance rejected by many when it was first performed and still fighting for its place in the art world (especially in Japan), and old paintings, accepted and glorified by so many over the years; a three-dimensional body against a two-dimensional object; the naked body stripped away from the social costume to reveal the truth beneath and an object framed, made beautiful for public viewing.

I was interested to see how these contradictions would interact since my feeling was that, despite the differences, there was common ground between Butoh and the paintings. In particular, *Perseus Turning Phineas to Stone* depicts the mythical hero holding Medusa's severed head which, by the power of its gaze, turns Phineas and his companions to stone. The gaze that can objectify the body finds a new context in the relationship between the painting and the viewer. Another layer emerges in the confrontation between the camera, the dancer, and the painting. As Roland Barthes described: "Now, once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in a process of 'posing,' I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image."⁵ The photo shoot in the National Gallery set up a similar condition for the embodied act as Hijikata's "training" process. The Butoh founder's students were forced to dance in cabarets where they were exposed to the obscene gazes of the drunken audience, thus objectifying their bodies. This experience allowed them to review the body as an object and so to use it in a new way. Likewise, the photographic situation demanded that Katsura Kan goes beyond the representation of his body in a search for the hidden layers of embodiment.

I remember being aware of Kan dancing with the painting *The Virgin in Prayer* (Sassoferrato, 1640–50); they existed together on the same level. The colors of the Virgin's clothes were strong—clear blue and white—which made her very vivid. I was looking at both Kan and the Virgin as 3-D bodies. They belonged to the same space.

REFLECTIONS

The synopsis of the projects outlined above describe my intentions and ideas before the photographic situation as well as some retrospective thoughts on confronting those by way of the dancers' involvement and being in a particular space. It is this immediate collaboration, a confrontation in a present time that gives a Butoh photographer and her practice a distinctive status. Butoh photographers such as Nourit Masson-Sékiné or Maja Sandberg suggest that their photographic acts place them in what I deem is the *in-between* position in relation to the dancers and the audience. Firstly, the unique mode of perception (mediated by a camera) separates them from the audience watching the dance without a camera. Secondly, a photographer is not directly involved in the Butoh dance, since she is not on the stage with Butoh dancers performing for the same audience, but her presence intervenes in both the dancer's and the audience's space. My intent is to look at notions such as shared artistic space, a mutual creative contract, and being in a moment in order to explain further the shift from a photographer-observer to a photographer-participant in an event.



Top: *Gallery Project*, Katsura Kan. Bottom: *Westminster Project*, Yuko Kawamoto and Tadashi Endo. Courtesy Karolina Bieszczad-Roley.



Top: *Gallery Project*, Gabriella Davis and Katsura Kan. Bottom: *Cemetery Project*, Tadashi Endo.
Courtesy Karolina Bieszczad-Roley.

The act of photographing always implies a dynamic co-presence between the photographer and the photographed subject, who do not simply exchange preconceptions, but are part of their interpretation process. Both of them feed their actions from the stimuli arising between them, adjusting to the unforeseen incentives. Although the act of photographing is marked by inescapable *a priori* intentions (manifested by the photographer's choice of shooting angle, lenses, shutter speed, and the dancer's understanding of space and body gesture), they are suspended at the very moment of pressing the camera shutter. The photographic act unfolds in the immediate present time of both artists; it therefore cannot be fully predicted.

The conscious thought may take place before the act of pressing the camera shutter or afterwards when it is being reflected upon, but the embodied gesture of a dancer cannot be fully envisaged other than in the actual moment when the gesture happens. The right moment is recognized by the photographer by releasing the camera shutter. On the other hand, the clicking sound of the camera informs others, including the dancer, about the photographer's recognition of the interesting moment. In this way, the co-presence of a photographer and a Butoh dancer provides access to new knowledge about each of them in the particular setting as they realize a creative act.

The act of photographing Butoh is also realized through people's spatial engagement. I understand space here not as an ontological constant but as a phenomenological condition shaped by people's interactions between each other. Each space offers different ways of perceiving other spaces, hence indicating a particular position within the photographic medium. It can be a position of the audience (people watching a performance without a camera), the Butoh dancers, or the photographer who "acts" with a camera. These positions are not fixed and assigned to the same person(s) but depend on the quality and characteristics of the interactions with which they engage.

The possible transitions between these positions were clearly marked in the *Westminster Project*. The people passing by to use the underground station became the audience. The performance they could have seen was not only the improvisation by dancers but also by the photographer, who was equally active in the event. In other words, the event consisted of dancing and photographing. In this way my position as a photographer shifted toward that of a performer due to the audience's perception. On the other hand, I remained in a photographer's position from the point of view of my assistants. They had been informed about the project and expected Tadashi Endo's and Yuko Kawamoto's improvisation. Their presence formulated the relationship to the dancers as in a theatre with the traditional boundaries of the audience watching and the performers acting.

The particular nature of the interaction (shared space) between a Butoh dancer and a photographer may place a dancer in the position of the audience regarding the photographer's act. It is a common argument that actors' performances are influenced by the presence of the audience. By the same token, a Butoh dancer reacts to the presence of a photographer, performing according to received impulses. Kazuo Ohno's duet with Nourit Masson-Sékiné may serve as an example here. The French

photographer's act informed the Butoh dancer as to his inner focus, which implies Ohno's conscious perception of Masson-Sékiné as a co-artist.

The interactions taking place between the creative people involved in photographing may place a photographer in various *performative contracts* with the rest of the artists. In my projects I asked dancers to improvise and contribute choreographically within the locations I had chosen. This approach set up the context of the photographic act, but the dancers and I did not decide beforehand on a detailed split of creative responsibilities and engagement. The performative contract develops in the course of the mutual intuitive experience of the creative event. Sometimes it may be broken by one of the artists if his experience shifts toward self-exploration (self-noticing) to the extent that he forgets about the context of the photographic act. This happened during the *Cemetery Project* when Tadashi Endo suddenly started dancing away, running very quickly to a place that was invisible from the place where I was taking pictures. I was equally focused on my experience and did not follow the dancer with the camera. Initially, I was surprised by this breaking of the performative contract, and then too focused to react immediately according to its outside impulse.

This leads to a related notion of the photographer's certain presence, an inner focus or attention. The photographer's awareness of that presence constitutes part of the decision making process when pressing the shutter of the camera. On the other hand, this presence places him away from the everyday, social mode of cognition, his consciousness during an act of photographing belonging to the artistic space but partially absent from the social realm. Swiss photographer Philippe Gross remarked on his personal experience of photographing:

My preoccupation with the insistent existential questions of youth was suspended when shooting pictures or developing them in the darkroom. In these precious, joyful moments I felt totally "in the present." No questions arose, no answers were required.⁶

The photographer suspends his beliefs and preconceptions about the world and lives the moment outside social and cultural cognition. I would suggest that the photographic act creates a phenomenological space and time marked by the particular contemporaneity. The photographer's perceptual experience is conditioned by a peculiar inner attention, which embeds the photographer in the immediate environment. This consciousness is engaged with the subject in their photographic relationship as they share intimacy, which may be unintentional. At this very moment of heightened awareness the camera's technicalities are being internalized and become like breathing. They do not work against the photographer but are incorporated in the inner presence, and the gesture of releasing the camera shutter derives from this state of being in a moment.

During all three projects, regardless of the intensity of the performative contract, I was able to connect with the Butoh dancers on an intimate as opposed to everyday social level through the photographic act. We did not talk during the projects.

However, the photographic situation created the environment, which allowed us to relate to each other in a different way than that of the everyday. I believe that there is some kind of closeness or togetherness between a photographer and dancers in experiencing the act of photographing. The meaning or experience emerging from the photographer and the dancers' act is a creative one that connects them on a metaverbal level. Both parties offer something personal, their subjective cognition of the surrounding environment, in order to share it and confront each other in the interactive space.

A duet between a Butoh dancer and a photographer is a close and intimate collaboration process that creates a unique artistic practice. It is not easy to pin down the transition from a photographer-observer to a photographer-participant. My experiences as well as testimonies of other photographers suggest that this process takes place in inner landscapes of consciousness and perception. It is experienced by both dancer and photographer and yet it escapes clear verbal classifications. I would strongly argue, however, that their duet is not simply documenting the dance or performing for the photographic image, as it tends to be viewed, but it is a creative act somewhere *in-between* the dance and the photograph. It is important to acknowledge this missing space in order to gain fuller understanding of photographic practice and collaborative process between photographer and dancer.

NOTES

1. Lee Chee Keng, "Hijikata Tatsumi and Ankoku Butoh: A 'Body' Perspective" (master's thesis, National University of Singapore, 1998), 2.
2. Laurencine Lot and Jean-Marc Adolphe, *Carlotta Ikeda—Buto Dance and Beyond* (Lausanne: Favre, 2005).
3. Jean Viala and Nourit Masson-Sékiné, *Butoh: Shades of Darkness* (Tokyo: Shufunotomo Co. Ltd, 1988), 152.
4. Ethan Hoffman, Mark Holborn, Mishima Yukio, Tatsumi Hijikata, and Haven O'More, *Butoh: Dance of the Dark Soul* (New York: Aperture Foundation, 1987), 131.
5. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (London: Vintage, 1993), 10.
6. Philippe L. Gross and S. I. Shapiro, *The Tao of Photography. Seeing Beyond Seeing* (Berkeley, Toronto: Ten Speed Press, 2001), 5.

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