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Resistance to the Society of the Spectacle: the “nikutai” in Murobushi Kō¹

Introduction

The spirit of the 1960s was generated by a specific historical situation, crystallised by the ANPO treaty crisis that provoked a series of explicit declarations of resistance and demonstrations. Decisive events took place against the renewal of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, first signed in 1951. One well-known example was the incident at Haneda Airport against Prime Minister Kishi's departure for Washington on January 16, 1960. Many groups, including the student organisation *Zengakuren*, expressed their dissent through mobilisation and public protest. So successful were the demonstrations that President Eisenhower's visit to Tōkyō on June 16 was suddenly cancelled. Maruyama Masao has regarded these protests in defence of human rights and episodes against abuse of power by the government “a revolutionary event in Japan's history” (Packard 329). Widespread public opinion in Japan seemed to be manifesting a strong reaction, principally directed against any form of foreign domination. There was a diversity of opinions within oppositional groups on many matters notwithstanding the broadly shared opposition to outside forces. For example, *Zengakuren* students felt extreme alienation from normative political processes and were split in their support or rejection of the authority of the Japanese Communist Party (Packard 336)².

Protest in the arts had been displayed by the avant-garde wave of the 1960s *angura* (underground theatre) that represents an important moment in reacting against the theatrical status quo in Japan. *Angura* has synthesised problems that involve not only Japanese questions, but also “global”, if not contemporary

¹ This article has been published in the review *Global COE Bulletin. Theatre and Film Studies*, 2007, vol. 1, Theatre Museum, Waseda University, Tōkyō, March 2008, 85-110.

² “Demonstrations in postwar Japan - known in Japanese as 'demo' - have become part ritual, part recreation, and part protest, the mixture varying with the occasion and the participants. Contrary to some reports, they are not 'riots', though they have led to riots; neither are they spontaneous, being carefully organized and tightly disciplined. There were 223 demo involving an estimated 961,000 people in Tokyo between April 1959 and July 1960” (Packard 262).

questions of human existence. The high level of innovation reached in those years is testified to by Uchino Tadashi's words: "we can now acknowledge that this was a time of rare productivity and rich creativity in Japan's theatre history" (Uchino in Fensham and Eckersall 41). It is also acknowledged that these innovations draw on already established theatre practices seen in a great variety of traditional and popular performing arts in Japan (see Centonze 2004). One of *angura*'s unique aspects is the way that it synthesises these aspects with contemporary aesthetics and aspects of the international avant-garde.

The artist Franz Marc, member of the original European avant-garde group *Der Blaue Reiter*, defended the work of art from its economic evaluation and commercial potential. Fifty years later, *ankoku butō* carried out a similar rebellion, although their source of resistance to commodification was at the level of the body rather than in the visual field. A crucial point was the fact that *ankoku butō* rejected techniques cultivated in Western dance. But more than this, *butō* sought to radically rethink the parameters for dance altogether. It sought to remake dance as a form of corporeal experience on a fundamental level by stripping away all extraneous elements. *Butō* rejected not only society and its values but also the wider field of performance, its history and Japan's artistic heritage.

However, it now seems that the fundamental aims of this most influential body-theatre are slowly fading. Many critics suggest that *butō* is becoming more fixed into a series of static propositions and, thus, moving far from its original breaking force. We might say that the situation is worse than Morishita Takashi describes, when he says that "it is [...] certain that butoh [sic] has lost *some* of its strength" (Morishita 6; my emphasis). Emerging from the underground scene, *butō* inevitably underwent several phases of institutionalisation and has been, at least in part, absorbed by the system itself. Some factors that have contributed to this creative crisis are Hijikata Tatsumi's death in 1986 and the consequent interruption of his project *Tōhoku kabuki keikaku*. Also, the retirement from the scene of one of the most intense dancers, Ashikawa Yōko, and the death in 2003 of Motofuji Akiko, called the "great mother" of *butō*, have led to this

decline. The consequent dispersion of the young dancers of Asbestokan³ has further exacerbated the sense of crisis.

In this essay I will present perspectives, that describe where *butō* stands today, with its radical decline in mind. A particular focus will be to examine *butō* in relation to the work of Guy Debord and the situationists. This perspective, I will argue, opens new critical pathways to assess *butō* in its historical and contemporary manifestations. Finally, I will consider the work of Murobushi Kō, who is one of the most significant artists whose career spans the historical period of *butō* performances, and who continues to create works in the present day. My intention is to show how his pieces mark new possibilities for *butō* as a radical art form, that explores the body and society at a fundamental level.

The Society of the Spectacle

Compared to the 1960s, abusive use of power today is probably even more dangerous, since its exponential and pervasive diffusion leads to a condition in which power is seemingly omnipresent. As a result, the idea that the avant-garde can be a mechanism for resisting capitalism has been thoroughly questioned. Nowadays we are in the dominion of an electronic globalism that stretches its veins into a diffused, worldwide theatrical intermediality. Paradoxically, fighting the rapid accumulation and excess of information seems to have become anachronistic. Probably it is now the time for an explosive artistic force to resist this 'invisible' field of colonisation. But where are performative solutions to be found?

A prescient analysis of this condition was presented in 1967 by Guy Debord in his influential work *Society of the Spectacle*. Debord was a leading figure in the situationist movement combining art and politics in France in the 1960s. The situationist notion of spectacle refers to the sense of extreme alienation experienced by humankind when faced by a pervasive commodification of existence. As Debord writes, life and our experience of

³ Since the 1950s Asbestokan was the studio of Motofuji Akiko where great part of Hijikata's work has been centred. Unfortunately it was closed at the end of the 1990s for financial reasons.

reality is reduced by the “autocratic reign of the mercantile economy elevated to the statute of irresponsible sovereignty” (Debord 2001, 190). In other words, reality is over-determined by spectacle:

In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation. (Debord 1983, thesis 1)

Characteristic of the society of the spectacle is to manipulate reality through mediatisation and spectacularisation, thereby transforming means into ends. In this situation, where the spectacle sanctions the automatising of images, and where “the real consumer becomes a consumer of illusions” (Debord 1983, thesis 47), contemporary humankind is moved by the principle of commodity fetishism. In such a context, commodity is a factually real illusion, and its general manifestation is the spectacle.

This critical position asserted in *Society of the Spectacle* was reaffirmed years later in Debord's *Commentaries on the Society of the Spectacle* (1988), where he notes that after the 1968 revolts - which did not succeed in their intent of destabilising the organisation of society in any country - the power of spectacle has been strengthened (Debord 2001, 190). Nowadays we see that spectacle has permeated reality as a whole, and a new form has even arisen which Debord calls “integrated spectacle” (Debord 2001, 194).

In light of Debord's important theory, which conflates spectacle with the *excess of media* (Debord 2001, 192; my emphasis), it would be interesting to reflect on how multimedia performance and the mixed space of bodies and technology respond to Debord's ideas.

In discussing such possibilities, however, we should bear in mind the fact that the aesthetic itself is no longer outside the world of the spectacle. Everything produced by the electronic age including aspects of our body, art, and the latest commercial offerings are seen as desirable and tempting. This makes critical perspectives on art in the age of spectacle complex and difficult to formulate. We must acknowledge that we are “inside” while adopting certain strategies of critical distance. As a banner of resistance to the society of the spectacle, trying to find a context of radical *nikantai* (the carnal body, or the

immediacy of the material body in performance as advanced by the founder of *butō*, Hijikata Tatsumi), a good example is the work of dancer Murobushi Kō.

Murobushi Kō's Profile

Murobushi's experimental artistic project appears unique in its performative manifestation, and his body expression is singular. His dance is different in aesthetic terms, but his intent seems to be very close to the purpose of scenic revolution advanced by Hijikata: to work on the anarchic force that the *nikutai*/carnal body is endowed with (Centonze 2002). Dance critic Ishii Taturō gives Murobushi a special position in *butō* history. Ishii states that the situation of *butō* in present Japan is not necessarily good and that it manifests a rampant stylisation that has lost sight of what should be the core of *butō*. He argues that Murobushi Kō is an unusual *butōka* [*butō* dancer], who continues to sacrifice his body like an ascetic, resisting the process of inertia, by provoking a sharp crack in contemporary *butō*: “Murobushi brings *butō* back to its origins and its essence awakening a large number of people inside and outside of Japan [to its potential]” (Ishii; my translation).

Murobushi's training in *butō* started in 1968 under Hijikata's guidance. Together they performed in Ishii Teruo's cult movie *Kyōfu kikei ningen* [The Horror of the Malformed Man] (1969) inspired by Edogawa Ranpō⁴. After giving up dance for two years, in 1972 Murobushi collaborated with Marō Akaji, Amagatsu Ushio, and others in forming the company Dairakudakan. In 1974 Murobushi founded the *butō* journal *Hageshii kisetsu* [The Violent Season], a sort of manifesto of rebellion with writings of different prominent authors, including Yamaguchi Masao, Hijikata, and Tanemura Suehiro⁵. Murobushi also performed striptease with Ashikawa Yōko in the nightclubs of Kabukichō in Shinjuku.

Also in 1974, Murobushi began to direct the first female *butō* group *Ariadone*. Two years later, he founded the all-male group *Sebi* as a gender

⁴ Murobushi also worked with Italian director Liliana Cavani in *Dove siete? Io sono qui* (1993), and supervised the choreography in the Mexican film *Vera* (2002) directed by Francisco Athie.

⁵ Murobushi declares in his unpublished note *Edge ga tatsu/Fukkan ni yoseru* [The Edge Stands/On the Reissue, 2001] that *Hageshii kisetsu* was neither a flyer of a theatre company nor a bulletin. *Hageshii kisetsu* should be intended as a transient event, an event *in fieri* that combines unrelated elements, “like a dancing liminal space (*Edgena shimen*), beautiful like a voluptuous demon” (Murobushi 2001; my translation).

opposite. In 1978, the two companies presented several productions in Paris and then toured through Europe spreading the knowledge of this dance outside Japan. A fruitful collaboration with Carlotta Ikeda developed and produced works including *Zarathustra* (1980, revisited in 2005), *Ut* (1981), and *Hime* (1984). Murobushi also worked with Motofuji Akiko, and choreographed for Endō Tadashi. After presenting *Hyōbaku suru nikutai/Corps Nomade* [The Roaming *nikutai/Corps Nomade*] in 1986 at Studio 200 in Ikebukuro⁶, he started, in 1988, to concentrate on performances with his wife, Kusanagi Urara, at that time a dancer with *Ariadone*. Together they created intense duo pieces like *Ephemere* (1988) and *Working Process* (1995).

Murobushi was also keen to develop interaction between artists in Japan and in the West, as is shown by the *Ko Murobushi Company*, founded in 1986, which included Western and Japanese dancers in productions such as *Panta Rhei* and *Les Larmes d'Éros*. Here Murobushi was assisted by the Italian *butō* dancer Pier Paolo Koss. Murobushi has toured through Asia, the United States, South America, and Europe taking part in important international dance festivals like *Montpellier Danse* (2000), *ImPulsTanz*, *London Butoh Network* and *Biennale Danza Venezia* (2006), where he performed his solo *Quick Silver*. Recently he collaborated with Kuroda Ikuyo, exponent of a new dance wave, the so-called *Shinnikutaiha*, in *Mimi* (2007), performed in the Red Theatre, Akasaka.

In 2007 he joined the project *Torcito Parco Danza* in Lecce that explored the Salento folk culture. He opened his *butō* to the tradition of Tarantism, showing a particular attitude in experimenting with border crossing in his performance.

What is noteworthy about Murobushi's works is the combination of influences informing his dance. Still today his encounter with Hijikata continues to give him moments of inspiration. Adding to this is a unique and special body technique that draws on folk religion from Japan's past. To this end, in 1970 he conducted a two year exploration of *shugendō*, an eclectic combination of Shintoism, esoteric Buddhism (*tendai* and *shingon*) and Taoism, principally based on body practices. These practices find expression in *yamabushi kagura*, dances in order to benefit and entertain the village

⁶ The musical conceiving of this performance has been developed by Hosokawa Shūhei.

community and *kami* (gods) (Averbuch 1995). The *yamabushi*, or ascetics living in the mountains, cultivate experiences that sharpen and refine human perception, thus endowing the ascetic with the capacity to insert themselves in the world of nature which is powerful and which ultimately eludes human control. To adapt the practitioner's body to the power of nature the *yamabushi* retire into the mountains, going on days-long wanderings without protection, for example, resisting the cold, and acquiring abilities in *jujutsu*, a form of magic associated with traditional performing arts. *Shugendō* concentrates pivotal elements of Japanese performativity and is prevalently practiced in north-eastern Japan.

Towards the *nikutai* in Murobushi's *butō*

Those who have viewed Murobushi in performance cannot ignore the incredible control he exerts over his body. This is the fruit of training the reactive sensibilities of the body throughout his nearly 40-year career.

From the ascetic experience of *yamabushi* to his *butō* expression, there emerges a constant experimentation that is directed nearly exclusively towards the body in performance. Murobushi's body is sculpted by a life of practice. The particular form of his feet seems to be adapted to create a dry and resonating stamping movement, as in Japanese *fumu*. A prevailing characteristic of the dancer is the curvature of his spine: close to feline agility, his wild catlike motion flows, while his naked curved back shows every single vertebra, nerve, and muscle. The act of oscillating between highly sensual and grotesquely violent moments has the effect of creating a sense of aesthetic distance.

Murobushi is able to reach an elevated sense of concentration in the body. As in Hijikata's *butō*, this sense of *nikutai* pertains to anarchy and chaos, and is therefore in contrast to the ordered system of classical ballet or modern dance. On stage, the immediate source of Murobushi's movement eludes us. It seems to begin in many centres at once; sometimes from a small point, it spreads out, develops, expands, and finally splits into precise and contrastive moments. These are sometimes performed with violence (*hageshisa*), but at the same time with infinite lightness. So, for example, in an exercise often used in workshops,

something (for example an insect or some different sense of self) would push its way through the body. In some moments in Murobushi's work there is a sense of intention in regard to the movement while in others the movement appears to be uncontrolled and as a response to, or result of the physical condition. In this sense, Murobushi both acts and is made to act (see Centonze 2008, 130-133).

As the title of Hijikata's famous work *Hijikata Tatsumi to nihonjin: nikutai no banran* [Hijikata and the Japanese: The Rebellion of the *nikutai*] (1968) shows, *butō* should push the dancer's body to its limits and show a pure raw physicality. The material that emerges from the anarchic state of the raw body constitutes the original and most radical purpose of *butō*. Hijikata directs the dancer's attention to the dynamics produced by a body always in transition, a body of infinite possibilities and change. The path leading towards the discovery of a carnal body (*nikutai*) is through this physical experimentation. The *butō* dancer always aims to reach this carnal body and thereby experiences its anarchic nature.

Japanese vocabulary offers diverse terms to refer to the English word "body". In the case of *nikutai*⁷ we are confronted with a carnal body that is subjected to the laws of nature. This material is transient and ephemeral, organic, and biological. The *nikutai* is the body of instinct and impulse, the body taken in its plasticity and pliability. There is always the possibility for physical deterioration in this kind of body. Its highest expression and potential is shown in processes like metamorphosis, modification and mutation (Centonze 2002; 2003-2004; 2004; 2008). For this reason, the *butō-nikutai* is not fixable on a choreographic level. The dance of the carnal body cannot be systemised through aprioristic techniques. As Shibusawa Tatsuhiko stresses, *nikutai* intrinsically possesses the qualities of *kiki* and *fuan*, i.e., crisis and anguish (Shibusawa 103). From this, it is possible to deduce that *nikutai* is the *shintai* made of flesh. *Shintai*, here, can be defined as the body moulded by

⁷ Besides *nikutai*, we might find, among others, words such as *karada*, *mi*, or *shintai* to describe the body. If we analyse the term *nikutai*, *niku* designates the flesh and the muscles, and *tai* is translated as body, substance, object, reality, style, form. *Shin* in *shintai* denotes the body, person, one's station in life, heart, soul, mind, ability, flesh, container.

society, the systemic body that is invested by social categories and community values (Centonze 2002, 2003-2004). According to Hijikata, the dancer should empty his *shintai* and make it a container (*utsuwa to shite no shintai*) (Mikami 137-138)⁸. In so doing the dancer moves towards and embodies the state of *nikutai*⁹.

The work of Murobushi often seems to point to the organic nature of the body and shows its plastic essence of corruptibility and transformability. Murobushi acts visibly on the *nikutai*, so that the body eludes being captured or placed into a state of logical fixedness. He believes that performers should operate outside of and beyond the dictates of conventional society. When discussing *butō*, he insists that it should be outside any kind of system. It should re-establish through performance the condition of *tandokusei*, the character of singleness, separateness, and independence. His works give us a clear example of the autarchic nature of the carnal body, which, if linked to the artistic sphere, reveals its autonomy and self-sufficiency. Talking about his solo performance *Edge* (2000), Murobushi suggests that the “carnal body trembles on the Edge and is the Edge” (Murobushi 2001; my translation).

One reason for referring in this essay to Guy Debord's thought and praxis is to draw attention to the erasure of images and the disillusion of images that occurs in his works. Although comparing dance to cinematography might be unusual considering the fundamental differences between the body as a medium and film, it is interesting to notice how Debord's praxis and politics intersect with the notion of *ankoku* (utter darkness) in Hijikata's *butō*. Both forms exhibit a kind of aesthetic reductionism that removes any sense of clarity and work instead between shades of darkness.

⁸ In regard to the discourse on the body as a hollow container in Japanese culture see also Gunji 230-234; Centonze 2008, 126-128.

⁹ In his study of *nikutai* and *shintai* in dance and criticism, Matsumoto Koshirō argues that for the person who chooses the *nikutai*, lives it critically and, from this point, wants to create a fictional *nikutai* (the *shintai* of *butō*), history (*rekishi*) is not a tale (*monogatari*) but becomes a state of reality. By narrating the idea and the image of the *shintai* “that has to be like this” one is faced with vivid history. Matsumoto concludes that Hijikata is the only *butōka* who has effectively faced this type of history. Accordingly, the common thought about *shintai-nikutai* dialectic is that the former is endowed with a historical character and the latter coincides with the state of things (*jōkyō*), but the problem lies in the impossibility of establishing a theory of *nikutai*, as well as a theory of the state of things. The following implication is that investigating critically (on a discursive level) *nikutai* means creating the *shintai* of dance (*buyō no shintai*) (Matsumoto 288).

The insurrectional act of Debord's anti-art is directed towards the manipulation not of content in cinema, but of the image itself. Debord's radical praxis presented in *Hurlements en faveur de Sade*, a black and white sound-film without an image track and screened in 1952, implies “radical sound-image discontinuity, negative sequences, multiple simultaneous acoustic inputs, direct manipulation of the celluloid surface through tearing, writing, and scratching, and an active engagement of the spectator a la 'expanded cinema” (Levin 337)¹⁰.

In his essay Thomas Y. Levin quotes Raoul Vaneigem speaking at the fifth Situationist International (SI) conference:

It is a question not of elaborating the spectacle of refusal, but rather of refusing the spectacle. In order for their elaboration to be artistic in the new and authentic sense defined by the SI, the elements of the destruction of the spectacle must precisely cease to be works of art. (Levin 328)

The *butōka* Murobushi adopts a similar approach in his works. He stresses the point that his sense of *butō* is a refusal of dance as art, noting how the dancer does not and must not dance. He often approaches this through a strong sense of repetition in his work. Reproducing the same forms intensely he challenges the carnal body and its physical limits. Repetition in this sense is both a reduction of form in the choreographic sense and the accumulation of form as an experience of intensity. Thus, this sense of repetition can be said to produce new experiences as well as exhausting old ones.

Murobushi's performance often includes vocal cries. Such sounds of breathing and crying are responses to the physical state of his body. This adds an acoustic dimension to the sense of *nikutai* in his work with cries, screams, and deep-breath-contractions halfway between human and animal.

Another constant presence is Murobushi's spoken interjections that at first appear incomprehensible and self-referential, but develop into statements and rhetorical questions to be grasped by the audience.

¹⁰ The technique of damaging the celluloid is called “chiseling”. Levin writes: “In fact, in abandoning the image track entirely, Debord pushes the gesture of chiseling - the damaging treatment of the filmstrip - to the limit: namely, the total destruction of the image” (Levin 344).

Important elements in his performance are the self-ironic, simple comments about movements he does on stage, as if he would shift from the dimension of performance into a quotidian situation. Murobushi's dry sense of humor stimulates hilarity even in the most serious situation. An example was seen during the performance *Edge* (2000)¹¹, when Murobushi hit the wall behind him and with a normal voice showing surprise said “*semakatta!*” (that was narrow). This provoked spontaneous laughter among the audience, although the general atmosphere of the performance was one of high tension. Other characteristics of his work include moments of abrupt “interruption” where Murobushi seems to be reflecting on something, or when he violently tumbles down from the stage, as he did during *Edge* (2003) at Teatro Rasi, Ravenna.

We can compare these repetitions and “interruptions” or discrepancies to the strategies of distanciation in Debord's filmic productions. As Levin comments:

Another important strategy of distanciation involves the depiction of the film crew, images of the clapper, the repeated *refilming* of a still photograph, and the staging of intentionally inept sequences in which the “*apparatus*” (camera, projection equipment, off-camera spectators) is visible. (Levin 358; my emphasis)

It is more than evident that what is referred to as “apparatus” in the quoted context, should be compared in the case of Murobushi's dance with the “organic apparatus”, the *nikutai* and the sense of repetition discussed above (see Centonze 2003-2004, 29).

Murobushi's works also create a strong sense of communication with the audience that occupies a special position in this context. His body is like a wire linked to the audience. The audience receives stimuli not only based on impressive sound-effects or artificial devices, but their sensations grow also in complete silence and the absence of scenery or technical artifice.

The issue of spectatorship is likewise central in Debord's writings and provocative productions. “The absence of film” serves as a stimulus for the

¹¹ This work was performed at Die Pratzte/Kagurazaka. The solo *Edge* is a series that includes *Edge 01*, *Edge 02* and *Edge 03*.

audience to react against the fostering of the passive consumption of the “spectacular” and to be involved in a critical engagement with the work instead (Levin 347).

***Bibō no aozora* (Handsome Blue Sky, 2003)**

With the intention of pushing *butō* in new directions, Murobushi began to collaborate with three young male dancers, Suzuki Yukio, Hayashi Sadayuki, and Meguro Daiji in a new company called *Kō&Edge*. In the work *Bibō no aozora*¹² inspired by the text of Hijikata, each dancer responded differently to the experience of working with Murobushi¹³.

In the opening scenes of the work a piece called *Metal*, composed by Gōto Osamu, was played. Slowly, three large brass panels lying horizontally on the stage appeared from the darkness. The light faded again and in the following scene the three young dancers, half-naked and wearing only black underpants and silver designs on their bodies, appeared behind each panel. The image on the bodies suggested a piece of armour¹⁴. Raising the brass objects, the performers advanced towards the audience meanwhile smashing them to the ground. They stopped, facing the audience. They stood behind the panels and slowly began to strike the external surface of the objects with their hands until reaching a climax. After a brief moment of stillness, they shook their bodies and the metal. Vigorously moving the panels, they reached a crescendo, their bodies interacting with the brass “bodies” in front of them. They smashed the metal objects to the ground and jumped very high, landing on them. There was silence. With the panels curved over their bent backs, they turned in a sort of dervish rotation until they crashed together.

¹² *Bibō no aozora* was performed in December 2003 at Park Tower Hall in Shinjuku in occasion of the Hijikata Memorial during the Petit Jade Festival. The new male group is produced by Kaibunsha.

¹³ The three young performers also make solo productions and direct their own company. Suzuki and Meguro started *butō* at Asbestokan and were students of Motofuji Akiko. Three years ago they were still engaged in *butō*, although both were refusing the intent of Hijikata's archaeology of Japanese *nikutai*. Since 2002 Suzuki has been directing his own company *Kingyo*, and is presently conducting his experimentation in the contemporary new wave *Shinnikutaiba*. On the other side, Hayashi, at that time, felt more as a contemporary dancer, taking his distance from *butō*. Recently Hayashi decided to leave the performance scene for a while, and a new member, Iwabuchi Teita, joined the group *Kō&Edge Co.*

¹⁴ The body paintings were designed by the artist and performer Kubikukuri Takuzō.

These panels were not objects easy to handle. Each of them weighs 18 kg and their sharp edges can easily cut the performer's skin. This is an example of the ways that the body is pushed to the limits of endurance in *butō*. Brass panels had been used in *Nikutai no hanran* by Hijikata and have become a symbol for *butō*. Murobushi suggests that the panels evoke an image of rice that shines like gold before it ripens. And in this context they become like bodies. In the program the costume designer was not listed by name but instead the word “*shinbūban*” [brass panels] was written.

In the scene following, the three panels were smashed one upon the other as the dancers also smashed into each other. The effect suggested a new kind of body unit (with six legs, six arms, and three heads) that started to breathe deeply onto the metal object. The silver body designs that previously appeared unconnected suddenly revealed patterns as the bodies lay on each other in unusual ways.

In choreographing this scene, Murobushi wanted the three dancers to experience a sense of sexual desire or perversion (*tōsaken*). The interplay among the three dancers was also ironic in that the sense of desire evident in the relationships between the performers was undercut by humour and mockery. The young dancers created a curious chain of confusion as they were unable to choose among each other.

Murobushi entered the performance space later in the performance. At first he was dressed in black pants and a jacket signifying his connection to society in general. In the process of the performance he removed his clothes thus crossing into a *butō* existence. Later he joined with the other dancers in an electrifying sense of union.

Murobushi takes the panel, and places it vertically on his neck, while he has his back turned to the audience. In this uncomfortable position that progressively brings him down towards the floor, he takes off his black jacket without interrupting the contact with the new object. The next image is of incredible force. The head is replaced by the vertical panel and the dancer stands under this 18 kg metallic shield. The object seems to have cut off the dancer's head, like a guillotine and towers over the decapitated body seen from

behind still wearing the black trousers. After the first contrasting contact with the cold, heavy, and sharp body of the panel Murobushi makes the metal violently tremble while it becomes an extension of himself. But the struggle is only at its beginning. The object's force overwhelms the dancer who, struggling with fatigue, tries to resist without any success, until his shaven head is trapped between the stage-floor and the panel.

Facing the audience he voices incomprehensible things and at last he says “*ippai*” (“it is full”, an expression Murobushi often uses when he approaches something on stage). The panel glides over his head and Murobushi starts to attack it, as if it was an *alter* object (representing the otherness to the proper body). He stands up, frees the metal from the wire, pulls it up, kicks it with determination also with his knees, showing aggressiveness, distance and extreme control at the same time. An attack and assault on the *alter* body¹⁵, that bends under his force, occurs. He blocks the waving panel with his teeth, flexes and drags the object, smashing it on the ground with his mouth. In the meantime, the three dancers, each with their arms wrapped around their bodies are struggling to move forward. Finally, Murobushi takes off his trousers, ridding himself of the only sign of society left and the four bodies pass from spastic and desperate movements to a gradually lighter atmosphere. The elements pertain to a “poor theatre”: body, brass panel, light, music and sound effects, but the exchange between them is kaleidoscopic, amplifying the bodies and refraining them.

A multilayered relationship between the bodies of the performers and the brass panels was suggested. The crisis of the body and its breakdown is seen in the reflection of the broken and fragmented images on the rectangular surfaces. We can associate these images with virility and the sex organ. Paradoxically, armed with the body against the body, pushing the body beyond its limits, challenging the body itself the dancers confront their own physical characteristics with those of the panels. Both show moving expanses endowed with ductility, workability, toughness, and hardness. The performance is rich in

¹⁵ It seems that the panels represents his own idealised body, the desired body, an obsessive attachment to the body of another person, the *différence* and *différance*, in a Derridian sense, from the dancer.

impetuosity, violence of gesture, imposing force, but also shows very soft and cathartic moments of poetry and homoerotic sensuality.



*Photo 1. Bibō no aozora,
Shinjuku Park Tower Hall, Tōkyō,
6-7 Dec. 2003.
© Yamauchi Junichi.*



*Photo 2. Bibō no aozora.
© Tanaka Hideyo.*



*Photo 3. Bibō no aozora.
© Tanaka Hideyo.*



*Photo 4. Heels,
Die Pratzze/Kagurazaka, Tōkyō, 13-14 Apr. 2004.
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*Photo 5. Heels
© Kamiyama Teijirō.*



*Photo 6. Heels
© Kamiyama Teijirō.*

Bibō no aozora seems to be a manifesto of the self-sufficiency of man and his independence from woman. The final emphasis is given in the last scene, which begins after the audience starts to clap. While John Lennon's song *Woman* plays, the company is lined up at the back of the stage with their backs to the spectators. Slowly they turn towards the audience and start to advance with grotesque poses. The performers begin deforming their faces with grimaces that become more and more amplified, as if they were desperately trying to cry out and scream with all their force (see photo 3). The grotesque contrast of this scene with the text of the song is more than evident.

The programme notes written by Murobushi were as follows:

Bibō no aozora

Men only crumble
With hot breath crumble and fall
Crumbling and falling hit the bones
Only that

Nothing happens...

Only a beautiful melody is played, towards extinction
Is it possible to create a cruel and comical dance?

In desperation distortion
Immersion in the change of the proper body

Nude spreading sweat
For gainlessness
Victory does not win consequently there is no defeat
No, the very defeat wins
The very hurt and weakness are strength
(Murobushi 2003; my translation)

In this text we can see the declaration of the independence of man from woman.

Heels (2004)

*Heels*¹⁶ offers a contrasting perspective. After their experience of the male domain, the journey of *Kō&Edge* continues on a different path. In a passage from one body to another, getting in contact with alterity, without marrying

¹⁶ *Heels* (Experimental Body #1) was performed in April 2004 at the small theatre Die Pratzte at Kagurazaka, Tōkyō.

definitely the *différence*, but trying to live it rather as a contagion, *Kō&Edge* experimented with new states of being and diverse affections of the *nikutai*. The transitional and heteromorphic carnal body occupies a special place in Hijikata's *butō* and one of the most complex praxis is that of the *narushintai* (see Mikami 134-136), the body in transformation, the body *in fieri*. Murobushi lays explicit emphasis on the critical body of a performer who has to experience, in an unending process, delaying identities in a dimension of non-identification.

Heels signals the beginning of a new performance series called *Experimental Body* that is built on the foundations of *Bibō no aozora*, where the group could explore new gender territory. Virility puts on stiletto heels. In contrast to male eroticism, as cultivated in *Bibō no aozora*, this time *Kō&Edge Co*, as they are now renamed, explore female eroticism. The male performers dance under special names created for the performance: Murobushi became “Koume”, Suzuki “Candy”, Hayashi “Fūfū”, and Meguro “Scarlett”.

The initial part is quite similar in structure to *Bibō no aozora*, but in this work the focus is on female orgasm, consequently the aesthetic results appear modified. The three young dancers wear black pants and coloured and lacquered high heels. Murobushi makes his entrance in a pair of red *geta* that, at a certain point, break under his violent dancing. The accident does not interfere with the performance, as he continues his excited stamping dance without interruption. In a following scene, the company appears with wrapped heads suggesting tension, suffocation, and entrapment. Diverse moments of *Heels* are even more impetuous than in the former work. Sexuality emerges in a more evident way. A further element of technical difference is the heightening of difficulty in the execution of the work. The performers' balance is challenged by the high shoes, which besides their height, were cheap and made of plastic. These flimsy shoes have to support violent movements, the total weight of the performers' bodies and the heavy brass panels. This implies a greater risk of injury in performance if the action is not executed with precision. Furthermore we have to consider the space of the theatre Die Prätze/Kagurazaka. The stage area is limited and, as the place was full, the audience was sitting partly on the stage-floor. In such a reduced space it could

have become a dangerous situation considering that the dancers did not smash only their bodies to the ground, but also the huge brass panels. Persons in the first row were stoically assisting, while only one tried to distance herself from the scene. The panels fell always exactly without touching the spectators, demonstrating the control of the dancers, especially Murobushi, who worked in close proximity with the audience.

Heels

Stopping breath the breath of in between from breath to love
 wear the brass
 panels as costume once more
 Put on the heels of desperation
 Paralysed hips of fragility heels of impotence
 Stopping breath wear the brass panels once more
 Acephal cavity of wrapped head the thin membrane's asphyxiated
 body
 From the inside to the outside quiver from the outside to the
 inside continue to hit
 Skin of deep innermost turn over with the heels star become a
 bird-star.

... as fusion/instant-melting? On the Edge, it is not like this, while exposing [oneself], the fact to “become” things like continuous change and metamorphosis; and then, opened to the unexpected, to be an event of encounter and hybridisation. (Murobushi 2004; my translation)

A development in this experimental study of the body was seen in April 2004, when Suzuki, Hayashi and Meguro executed a strip-dance, choreographed by Murobushi, at the night-club Show-up Ōmiya Gekijō, where usually female artists appear.

Definitely more scenic elements than in *Bibō no aozora* and *Heels* are involved in the solo *Subete wa yūrei* [All Ghost], performed at Wenz Studio in March 2004. Murobushi, appearing on a ladder half-naked with only a white short *tutu*, moves in front of the video-installation curated by him and Gōto Osamu, who supervised also the music. His use of the body inscribed in a context of mediatisation of art emerges in balance with the alterities (other media) on stage, focusing the attention of the audience.

Preceding *Heels*, this performance was part of a three-day series, *Gisell(s)* (2004), developed for the female dance group *Dansu 01*. In this further experimentation, centred on “vulnerability”, the choreographer has tried to create a contemporary-*butō* stage.

If we compare this project with his work with *Kō&Edge*, his difficulty in directing the female dancers, who were engaged for the first time in a *butō* performance with Murobushi and are prevalently of contemporary dance education, has been visible.

Politics of the Body as Resistance to the Society of the Spectacle

The descriptions and arguments advanced here show a performative condition in Murobushi's work that I would like to extend to the critique of the society of the spectacle, as depicted by Guy Debord.

According to Debord the end of cultural history is visible in “the project of its supersession in total history,” and in, “the organization of its preservation as dead object in spectacular contemplation” (Debord 1983, thesis 184). As a consequence, “society's former *common language* confronts its artificial recomposition in the commodity spectacle, the illusory representation of the non-lived” (Debord 1983, thesis 185). In his essay, Debord treats the end of the art world with its progressive integration into the capitalistic order, as the “loss of all human *mastery*” (Debord 1983, thesis 189).

Generally speaking, body and skill occupy a peculiar position in Japanese performing arts and the former is cultivated as an “impersonal medium” (Muroi). This implies a concentration in theatrical praxis on the execution and use of the body, creating and favouring the factor of mediatic investment of the body *per se*. We might observe a reductionist process of the concept and praxis of technology even in the pre-electronic age. We might notice a tendency for the body as a technological *organ(on)*, on which it is necessary to operate with constancy and firmness making it manageable for artistic exigency. The body is a real and simple instrument or tool to work with.

What emerges is a technological perspective of body itself, the body seen in its articulations and objective impersonality, and, especially in performing arts, it takes shape as a form of theatre-technology in its structural interaction¹⁷.

Probably the most evident *différence* lying between body and media, until now, is reproducibility: notwithstanding cloning, the same body is not able to reproduce its ontology a second time.

Debord, dwelling upon Dadaism and Surrealism, states that the former wanted to suppress art without realising it and the latter wanted to realise it without suppressing it (Debord 1983, thesis 191). Generally speaking, one of the bases of *butō* is its opposition to structurally organised choreographic formulas, embracing the concept of anti-dance. Notwithstanding this attitude, we might recognise the creative character, which is still alive in Murobushi's case.

In Murobushi's praxis the nucleus of authenticity of artistic expression is still preserved, as a sort of alarm of the confused world we are actually living in. What is realised is not alienation detected by Debord in the mechanism of consumerism, but *Verfremdung* that helps to prevent the contemporary man from being captured by his or her predestination dictated by the mainstream, the control of economy in the social sphere (Debord 1983, thesis 17) and the "monopoly of appearance" (Debord 1983, thesis 12). Murobushi tries to eradicate the morbid symptom of fallacious appearance in spectacularistic art by working from its inside, making use of its toil, and using the body as a material. Although the body is near the point of its vanishing, the performance insists on live action in a vivification of communication and unique relationships between performer and audience, without falling into what Debord describes as "the alienation of the spectator to the profit of the contemplated object" (Debord 1983, thesis 30).

Where the real world changes into simple images, the simple images become real beings and effective motivations of hypnotic

¹⁷ I develop this aspect also in other articles of mine. I defined this reductionist process and the tendency for the body as a technological instrument in traditional performing arts as well as in *butō* "the diachronic polymorphism of *wazaogoi*" (see Centonze 2004, 73-75; 2008, 130-133).

behavior. The spectacle, as a tendency *to make one see* the world by means of various specialized mediations (it can no longer be grasped directly), naturally finds vision to be the privileged human sense which the sense of touch was for other epochs; the most abstract, the most mystifiable sense corresponds to the generalized abstraction of present-day society. But the spectacle is not identifiable with mere gazing, even combined with hearing. It is that which escapes the activity of men, that which escapes reconsideration and correction by their work. It is the opposite of dialogue. Wherever there is independent *representation*, the spectacle reconstitutes itself. (Debord 1983, thesis 18)

The images reflected by the performances mentioned above do not invigorate or support the passivity of the spectator inserted into the system of the society of the spectacle. They are not appearances or substitutes for actions, but, generally speaking, the visual result coincides with scenic acts without special effects. The audience is stimulated and activated in a dialogue and not a monologue typical of the social spectacle. It is induced to critique. Murobushi's work does not leave to technological devices the performative exploration, but concentrates on the performer in the act of production.

In regard to an important problem in Japan's theatre culture that arose in the 1980s, Uchino Tadashi analyses its tendency towards what Harootunian defines as, “national poetics,” which implies the suffocation of a critical engagement in performative arts (Uchino in Fensham and Eckersall). In the 1990's, following Uchino's outline, theatre was animated by a new spirit, a new need appears on the horizon: “to come up with some kind of performative way to deal with our political reality” (Uchino in Fensham and Eckersall 47). Uchino selects two groups that, according to him, show a conscious engagement and commitment in the arts, Dumb Type and Gekidan Kaitaisha. He observes how their performances are filled with “political bodies” signed with precise categories.

It seems difficult to me to detect in Murobushi's productions and artistic attitude what Uchino denounced as the narrativised theatre culture of *angura*. Although the dancer Murobushi experiences *yamabushi* culture he does not seem to be involved in a “rhetoric (al) discourse on the 'absolute difference' of Japanese-ness” (Uchino in Fensham and Eckersall 37).

Rather than the condition of “political bodies” in Japanese contemporary theatre, I would like to emphasise the instance of *body-politics*, i.e., the expression of contestation incarnated in the basic and organic nature of our physical being. The *politics of the carnal body* in *butō*, is visible on the chorographic level. As dance, *butō* unfolds a breaking and dissident body-criticism that implies a radical resistance to the body as manipulated by the society of the spectacle. The body is pushed beyond its limits, and its core should be preserved from aestheticism, sensationalism, or exhibitionism. This way, the radicality of *nikutai* becomes a political act. Reaching a high intensity this employment of the body implies a political position. Movement becomes a political praxis, anti-capitalistic in its economy.

Conclusion

Following the arguments mentioned above, we might recognise in Murobushi's performative action an inclination towards what Uchino defines “[...] theatre as cultural intervention, not as dream machine which reflects our unconscious fears and escapist desires” (Uchino in Fensham and Eckersall 47).

The critical fracture is offered by the reduction of performance to the performative act *per se*, placed beyond its content¹⁸. The radicality of such an operation implies that the performing or scenic moment becomes a moment of political denunciation, above all against the performer's own body. As has been evident in *Heels*, the provocation was not directed at the audience but was realised especially in Murobushi's *nikutai*. It is the dancer himself who is exposed to the physical risk that the performance entailed. The fullness of the performative act, fruits of a long discipline exerted on the body, goes beyond the *mise-en-scène*. The authenticity of Murobushi's dance expresses itself through the strictness, rigour, and gravity with which he acts on the body. The dancer generates a critical dialogue with his body. Positioning himself in confrontation with it, he reduces his art above all to the manifestation of states

¹⁸ In this essay I took intentionally into consideration only the performative act of Murobushi, although his dance, cultural research, and reflections are stimulated and nourished by lectures of, for example, Friedrich Nietzsche, George Bataille, Jean-Paul Sartre, Jacques Lacan, Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari.

of being, thereby criticising his own body. The relationship that derives from such a condition is inevitably one of distance. Far from the aesthetisation of the gesture, the absolutisation is accomplished only if aesthetics is brought back to its ultimate aim. What is realised is not the *form*, but movement, the dynamics of action that pricks the senses of the spectator. An aesthetic event in its etymological definition, *aisthētikós*, means what concerns sensation and perception. A sort of declaration of independence of the performative body that manifests its artistic autarchy, and covers the functions of all components strictly necessary to a theatrical act.

The deep wounds made on Murobushi's neck by the brass panels were not exhibited, nor was the pain he must have felt the next day when repeating the performative action. The artistic dimension may emerge, when the effort is evident, but does not flow into exhibitionism. What is this effort? Effort is directly linked to the working *nikutai*, our technological being that produces work, *ergon*, in a physical dimension.

Murobushi's performative choices preserve a certain equilibrium and measure in consumption and economy of movement, of aesthetics and of aesthetic devices. What prevents the performance from its reduction to an informational complex that reigns in our electronically mediated society is a certain consciousness of the importance of *doing* by itself.

Although *butō* is involved in its decline, we might state that Murobushi is always on a search for virginal creativity in his art, trying to advance the gestation of the gesture into poetical violence.

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