

an empty room

IMAGINING BUTOH AND THE SOCIAL BODY IN CRISIS

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*To my parents,
Tillie and Michael,
for making everything
possible, and Joy,
for lighting my way
every day*

P R E F A C E

This text began on a whim, in fall 2007 in my first grad school seminar at the University of California–Los Angeles. The class surveyed the performance studies legacy of anthropologist Victor Turner and theatre scholar-artist Richard Schechner, and was taught by Allen (“Al”) F. Roberts, also an anthropologist by training, and a protégé of Turner. At age forty, after seven years in the same job, and a breakup from a decade-long relationship, I was ready for change. As a longtime contemporary artist and, especially, butoh dancer returning to school for a Dance MFA, this meant one thing in my mind: no longer defining myself as a butoh dancer, a label to which I’d held steadfastly since beginning my performance career in the 1990s. However, after spending ten weeks unpacking ritual theory, social drama, liminality, and basic forms of resistance against the hegemonic power structures of whiteness inherent in academia and Western culture that Al’s lens as an Africanist cultural and religious scholar helped us to hold at arm’s length, I realized one thing above all else: I *was* a butoh artist. First lesson: anything you feel the need to go out of your way to deny strongly about yourself is probably true.

Second lesson was a simple human one: follow life. Conscious of our aspirations as future academics, Al would often segue into anecdotes from his own grad training, especially with Turner at the University of Chicago, where Turner’s best advice on research methods, institutional politics, and choosing a project you could live with for years on end would often come during late-night group discussions after dinner at his home. Al also taught this way in the classroom, keeping it personal with stories from his own fieldwork as student and professional; mistakes made, assumptions blown, and especially the necessary risks taken and trust earned before true secrets revealed themselves.

This book, then, is a product of that time, when I was forced to admit that butoh, or at least my version of it, would never cease to rule my life. All my artistic, intellectual, and activist work since then has been driven by my passion to work through my understanding of butoh’s core vision

of everyday life: *chaos*, *contradiction*, and *crisis*. Just as every paper, social media post, or essay is a potential article or book chapter, each of the latter is also the kernel of a possible artistic work. Likewise, each of my performance, visual, and media works has resulted in, or even ended up as, a scholarly text. As I state in the introduction, my art and scholarship are not only inseparable; they are the same thing. This book is an expression of that mindset, an imagining of self as scholar-artist that I hope can serve as a conceptual or strategic resource for other interdisciplinary practitioners working at the intersection of arts, culture, and discourse.

Conversely, what this book is not—but probably what a follow-up project can and should be—is a manifesto and guidebook for action. If butoh is to fulfill its potential as not only a clapback against hegemony, but a philosophy and practice of manifesting liberated modes of being, then projects such as this book are only one step in the long dance to remake this world.

Since beginning this writing many years ago, I have also moved in multiple other directions, digging deeper to complicate my artistic and intellectual practices, and also taking on a few new ones. After the 2016 U.S. presidential election, the ever-increasing struggle against anti-Blackness worldwide, and the military coup in Thailand while I was living there for eight years, I continue the lifelong path of decolonizing my mind-body. My goal is gradually and publicly to examine and dismantle my privilege as a middle-aged, cis-het, Asian American male who has benefited from the spoils of patriarchy and the white-adjacent, model minority trope, while also learning from hard and career-threatening lessons as a tenure-track academic vulnerable to the needs and whims of predominantly white institutional racism. Life happens for an academic and artist of color in the U.S.A., and for that I am both damaged and grateful.

Finally, without knowing what life will be like in American society or internationally by the time this book is published, I write in the midst of dark times. These words pour out of me months after Los Angeles County, my birthplace and home for most of my life, recorded an average 14,000 Covid-19 infections daily during Christmas week, making it the epicenter of the global crisis at the time, and later dwarfed by hundreds of thousands of infections weekly and thousands of deaths daily in India and worldwide. Millions have died from the virus, and despite vaccines that tentatively promise a long, slow climb out of the pandemic,

the interpersonal, socioeconomic, political, and environmental consequences of this nightmare remain ever present for the future. Thus, in this historical moment, I offer this book to you with sadness, trust, and hope.

Michael Sakamoto

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A decade's worth of fieldwork and archival research from dissertation through the final writing phase was supported by many sources, but especially the Asian Cultural Council, UCLA Terasaki Center for Japanese Studies, UCLA International Institute, and the University of Iowa's Center for Asian and Pacific Studies.

For the sake of many in academia who also do cultural and race-based work and weather similar trials, I must also mention the sad reality of certain obstructionist forces at the University of Iowa that actively discounted my research and directly endangered this book's fruition. Therefore, the deepest bow of gratitude to the many colleagues who enthusiastically supported the extra long road with letters of support, feedback, resources, fieldwork and performance opportunities, and just plain camaraderie and morale boosting, including (alphabetically) Eloy Barragan, Jennifer Buckley, Peter Chanthanakone, Ananya Chatterjea, Meiver de la Cruz, George de la Peña, Thomas DeFrantz, Daniel Fine,

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Thanks very much. This belongs to all of you.

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From the photo essay, "MuNK," Tashiro, Japan, 2016.

INTRODUCTION

(MY) BUTOH

“Ceci l’histoire d’un homme marqué par une image d’adolescence.”

— from *blind spot*, Michael Sakamoto (2014), after Chris Marker

“無.”

PUNCTUM: FIRST EXPOSURE

Some memories are vague. Others are sharp. This one cuts like a knife.

It happened during my undergraduate years. I don’t remember exactly where or when; only that I couldn’t stop staring at the photo image searing itself into my mind and body.

Stark contrasts of black, white, and barely grey, as if silver halides were still burning, dancing, in a flash of light in a pitch-black chamber.

Everything situated in a minimal space. On the street? In a room?

A studio.

On the left, a large, organic object. A worm-like or phallic sculpture?

A human body.

To the right, gnarled tree branches stood on end? Large insect legs?

Three arms and fisted hands planted on the ground.

Questions flood my brain. Are these people or creatures? Are they women, men, or aspects of self, knowable and expressible only through the body? When did this strange moment take place? Why did the photographer disembody his models in this way?

More than anything, I ask myself: Is this the kind of art I want to make?

I want to meet the photographer, to know why he took this photo; why he thought it was necessary.

Even more, I want to be one of those bodies . . .

STUDIUM: NOT SEEING

In my early to mid twenties, I repeatedly came upon an image from the photo essay, *Otoko to Onna* (Man and Woman), published in 1961, by Japanese photographer Hosoe Eikoh in collaboration with three dancers, including butoh performance founder Hijikata Tatsumi. Each time, my consciousness was pierced in the same way. My assumptions about the body, rooted in socioeconomic relations dominating American gender roles in the mid-twentieth century, felt challenged. As a young Asian American, based on scant knowledge of my great grandparents' Japanese immigrant generation, my grandparents' conservative second generation, and the modern Japanese television shows airing on UHF channels in the 1970s and 1980s that my family watched regularly, I thought that I understood Japanese people as essentially acquiescent, hardworking, and self-effacing. But rather than showing recognizable identities or whole bodies, Hosoe's image depicted parts akimbo and unruly in stark relief, revealing another Japan, one shot through with confusion, disjuncture, and a blinding *ankoku*—utter darkness. The photo is rough and sensual, a potential threat to the female entity from the male limbs, their arms and fists gazing upon and marching toward her. But the female, with the curves of her coccyx and buttocks aimed at the men's limbs, is facing them down. Everything in tension. The crisis of desire.

“I'm interested in the human body because it
has endless possibilities.”
— Hosoe Eikoh (2010)

Here is normally the place in a text where the reader would be shown the photo in question. But just as philosopher and literary critic Roland Barthes, in his classic photo theory book, *Camera Lucida* (1981), refused to show the Winter Garden photo of his mother at age five that haunts every page, so I cannot show Hosoe's image. It would defeat my purpose, subverting the subjective truth of my narrative by pricking each reader differently, giving them their own experience distinct from mine. They would create their own relationship with the image. It would become *their* photo.

Similarly, when Hijikata choreographed dancers through sequences of *butoh-fu*, his choreographic image-words, to stimulate movement,

each performer manifested them with subtle differences according to their body's interpretation. Their resulting movement demonstrated the subjective affect dormant within the intersection of each image-word prompt and the performer's mind. Hijikata's dance, rooted in his own idiosyncratic imaginary, was thereby transposed and became their dance. Moreover, when subjectivity in such expression reaches deeper, when the dancer is, in effect, dancing themselves, but filtered by archetypal image-words referencing bodies, elements, and emotions, the performing self becomes other as well. It is here, then, in bodies vulnerable to the amorphous practice we call *butoh*, that I propose a calling, in the place where lines become blurred between personal space and the world at large, and the instability of the former embodies the turmoil of the latter, and where the rootless quandary of the contact zone among artists and witnesses becomes the agency of change.

MY, NOT "I"

Mass media and digital technology have overwhelmed our daily lives. Well beyond the electronic broadcast saturation and packaged audiovisual experiences proliferating since the late twentieth century, dominant ideologies now constantly invade our bodies through cultural and socioeconomic dependence on personal computers, the internet, and especially mobile devices and social media. The media-saturated, service-oriented, commodified body consumes its virtual self. We are eating our selves alive.

For these reasons, I believe that *butoh* performance is, in many ways, an attempt to save lives. It is a legislative bill put forward in a congress of mind, body, and spirit. It is a call to arms against our selves, the ones that we are not. What is the generative potential of *butoh*, a cluster of dance and performance practices that began as radical over six decades ago in Japan, but are now common enough to be stereotyped and cliché in the international art world? The first generation of *butoh* artists responded to the historical moment and place of post-World War Two Japan. How might artists influenced by *butoh*'s subsequent global diaspora, however, generate strategies appropriate for social urgencies in the twenty-first century, to imagine newly radicalized and expanded *butoh*-based practices?¹

I look to the conceptual roots of Hijikata's early experiments, the philosophical core of what we now label *butoh*. Tracing corporeal-

intellectual subtexts from the late 1950s through the 1970s, I see *crisis* as a core concept on which butoh was formed and its lineage of practices continue to evolve. I ask how we may employ elements from butoh's range of foundational concepts, forms, and techniques to devise a method for maintaining not merely an avant-garde practice, but the power of cultural transformation over time and in multiple contexts. Hijikata propagated the idea that the body possesses inherent knowledge of its own psycho-physiological needs and innate mechanisms for escaping, negotiating, and reimagining adverse life conditions. He also situated the ambivalence of Japanese postwar identity between a late capitalist Western body and a premodern Japanese body. Hijikata expressed both in relation to social imaginaries, at first inspired by routinized materialistic behavior in the oppressive urban environment of postwar Tokyo, and in later years, exaggerated tales of his childhood in the Tohoku region of northern Japan. Decades and hundreds of butoh artists later, I posit this framework as paradigmatic, a method of activating what Hijikata called *the body in crisis*. This instrument rooted butoh in oppositional binaries, dialogic and dialectic frameworks to address and transform psycho-physical and psycho-social crisis.

My project is thus a speculative approach to butoh practice and discourse. I theorize on how to witness simultaneously beautiful and harsh aspects of one's reality and make of this understanding what is socio-politically possible. Butoh dancers counter the surface-level positivism of images by attempting to become radical enigmas and force viewers to witness the rebirth of embodied agency in every expiration of meaning.

DESIRING DEATH, WRITING MY SELVES

When an avant-garde practice moves past innovation to convention, iconic figures often appear that symbolize its validity and ossify its authority. What is not always obvious, however, are the motivations, instigations, and avenues through which this journey occurs. These elements often remain obscure until the moment of innovation's occurrence, which is the selfsame as its passing. The figure's realization is also its death.

Hijikata was such a figure, deriving innovation from the detritus of marginalized identities left behind by the status quo, transitioning from late modern to early postmodern, and always in danger of settling into an orthodoxy of his own creation. He often approached the immolation

of his own circular thinking about art-life-death, an incessant becoming of his personally imagined *ankoku*, a pitch-black well of being and nothingness from and into which any and all manner of selves arose and subsided.² In his mid-career essay, “From Being Jealous of a Dog’s Vein” (1969), for example, he expresses a desire for closeness with death: “I cherish wet animals and the bodies of the old, withered like dead trees, precisely because I believe that through them I may be able to come close to my desire. My body longs to be cut into pieces and to hide itself somewhere cold” (2000, 56).

I take inspiration for this book from Hijikata’s panoply of figurative deaths, which generated a broad lexicon of images, gestures, and identities to present, in a Barthesian, *punctum*-like mode, a cosmology rooted in life’s challenges and eventual demise.³ I am provoked also by the knife edge of certain post-structuralist poetics, such as in Jacques Derrida’s eulogistic essay, “The Deaths of Roland Barthes” (1981). The author speaks of Barthes as having already attained death, even in life, through the fact of his name:

While so many codes and rites work to take away this privilege, because it is so terrifying, the proper name alone and by itself forcefully declares the unique disappearance of the unique—I mean the singularity of an unqualifiable death. . . . Death inscribes itself right in the name, but so as immediately to disperse itself there, so as to insinuate a strange syntax—in the name of only one to answer (as) many. (2001, 34)

Derrida speaks of death as final, incomplete, and unknowable until it is upon us, and yet eternally with us in the myriad ways in which we exist, feel, and act. He demonstrates this proliferation in a typically Barthesian manner, crafting his essay as a succession of short texts, each incomplete and dependent on the others. Derrida’s text is akin also to one of Barthes’s key topics, the “unary photograph,” replete with both the definitive objectivity of *studium* and the prickly, evocative, and unknowable subjectivity of *punctum*. Derrida’s essay is fragmentary and incomplete in order that subject and reader may complete it, making it both death and possibility for life. Each incomplete statement, by writ of its *desire* for the other, is also a plea, a writhing, butoh-like grasp, begging the question of death’s inevitability and the generative potential of the renewal that necessarily follows it.

Written with a similar goal, each chapter herein is one of many possible means of continuing what I believe Hijikata started, a *modus operandi* of dancing through the inexorability of life and death. I am inspired by Derrida witnessing rebirth in every expiration and failure of word and image, and especially Barthes's countering of *studium*, the positivist social desire to definitively know the immanent qualities underlying an image via its apparent surface details, with *punctum*, the radical enigma inherent in every viewer's perception. Likewise, I gesture unsteadily toward a tangled web of action and reflection, not the least reason for which is my intercultural identity: born to parents of Japanese and Chinese ethnicity; adopted by a Japanese American family; consistently read in American society as simply "Asian" or "Asian-American";⁴ Western postmodern in artistic foundation, but rooted in an exotified, premodern-styled, Japanese dance vernacular choreographed through a social justice lens. As a *butoh*-based scholar-artist of unstable identity, I make sense in the way that historian Robin D. G. Kelley attributes his intellectual patience to his mother raising her children as Hegelians, teaching that "the purpose of critique is dialectical, to reach a higher synthesis, which in turn reveals new contradictions demanding new critique" (2017). As a practice that has always involved diving headlong into contradictions, *butoh* demands perpetual reimagining.

Given *butoh*'s customary engagement with personal narrative, this project also demands my cyclical re-envisioning of self at each step. I take my experience of *butoh*—encountering a photobook in 1991, attending my first performance in 1993, student training from the mid to late 1990s, and developing an intercultural and interdisciplinary artistic practice since then—as central metaphors of my understanding. Throughout this book, I refer to these and other encounters and reflections, checking in with my past, present, and future selves; my thinking body, dancing mind, and living spirit; or, as I refer to it in the title to this introduction, *(my) butoh*.

My aim is an implicit resolution, as much through juxtaposition as integration. My voice tells its own story and makes confessions about positionality, truth, and lies. My epistemology embraces the paradox of equating authority and subjectivity with fiction and truth. The latter binary feeds my expressive mode of subjecting one's being to being one's subject. Thus, I charge my auto-ethnographic self, not as an objective participant-observer, nor a primarily intellectual artist-scholar,

but rather as a nonbinary and expressive *observer-participant* and *scholar-artist*.

Moreover, this book is a performative-literary expression of self. Language is my dance as much as dance is my language, both inextricably entwined within my liminally ambivalent, Japanese American identity, making my writing indeterminate and precarious in a mode akin to African American literature as described by cultural scholar Vince Schleitwiler, “wherein the task of learning how to read is always problematized, critical, and unfinished, never reducible to formal processes of education. It troubles the privileging of either print or oral media, the visual or the aural; it is associated with mobility, as both dislocation and flight; it signifies both the possibility of freedom and the threat of its foreclosure” (2017, 4). Schleitwiler asserts that such literary texts are activated in the present, and we must learn to undertake their “historical and theoretical preparations so that their unpredictable agency might be called forth in the process of reading” (4).

In attempting such a mission, this book functions similarly to *butoh*, a reflexive expression that questions its own transnationally prescribed premises, redolent with competing value structures and tropes of power: Japanese and American, Asian and Western, imperialist and postcolonial. I gesture toward strategies of vulnerability, difference, and imagination as ends in themselves, inspired by such seminal *butoh* works as *Kinjiki* (1959), *Kamaitachi* (1968), *Hijikata Tatsumi to Nihonjin: Nikutai no Hanran* (1968), and others that laid the ground for future *butoh*s to come. I am also inspired by auto-ethnography, wherein, as James Clifford describes, “objects and epistemological grounds are now appearing as constructs, achieved fictions, containing and domesticating heteroglossia” (1988, 95). While not purposely telling lies about my story, I hope that my heteroglossia of data achieves the persuasive sensitivity of good fiction in its ability to depict the often startling and transformative ambiguity of *butoh* practice. Or as Clifford states, “If this ethnographic self-fashioning presupposes lies of omission and of rhetoric, it also makes possible the telling of powerful truths” (112). Or, as scholar Bruce Baird notes in his critical biography of Hijikata, “As he progressed, he was to take more and more seriously the idea of self-fashioning, communicating with different types of people, and being instantly at home in many worlds” (2012, 73).

The *butoh* community underscores this point. *Butoh* means many

things to many practitioners, begging the question of why one should even use the word. Dancer Oguri asserts that butoh was less a concrete art form than an artistic movement that essentially ended decades ago after Hijikata's passing (2010). Butoh artist Katsura Kan says butoh is whatever you need it to be to move your practice forward (2009). Ishimoto Kae, a longtime butoh dancer and director of the Hijikata Tatsumi Archive at Keio University since 2020, advocates for multiple lineages of butoh across the globe in the modern era. My only definite answer is to say that I cannot escape it. Even when I see performers whom I feel are lacking in expressive talent, depth, or rigor, I often still sense an ineffable quality of energy or gravity that binds them to my sense of life. When I see photos of Hijikata, my mind immediately questions and expands. When I see images of Ohno Kazuo—Hijikata's own dance inspiration and a prime force throughout the first half century of butoh until his death at 103 years—I want to grow old, know pain, and feel love. When I spend time with butoh artist colleagues, I feel as much myself with them as in my hometown.

My reflexive writing is, simply put, a manifestation of my butoh. Since the late 1990s, when I began creating original performances, my work has been presented in fifteen countries in main stages, festivals, alternative spaces, museums, galleries, and natural sites. I have spent over a quarter century deeply invested as an actor in the narrative that I examine. I am also devoted to questioning my artistic lineage, thus addressing my multiple identities and positions through a multilateral voice. In short, my scholarship is also my art.

IT IS WHAT IT IS

The fact remains that butoh as a term has stuck to an ever-widening lineage of movement practices, ranging from Hijikata and his cohorts to other Japanese and international dancers. As Morishita Takashi, Hijikata's former producer and the founding director of the Hijikata Tatsumi Archive, states: "Today's Butoh is diverse, and we are barely able to determine coordinate axes or a frame of reference on which to distribute it. Butoh itself has proliferated beyond logic. In these circumstances, the likelihood that Hijikata's Butoh has been faithfully passed on is close to nil" (2015, 8).

Butoh has also circulated in the presenting venues and intellectual discourses of Western postmodern and contemporary performance

since the 1970s, when Japanese artists began performing in Europe and the United States, to the present day, when butoh (or, at least, a butoh-inspired aesthetic) is appropriated and referenced by artists, critics, and audiences globally. Just like jazz and modern dance transformed through numerous and sundry forms, butoh as a broader spectrum than its original impetus happened, and it continues to become whatever it can or needs to be within artistic, social, or geographic contexts, creating a potent brew of communal mythology and heated debate. From micro-gestural improvisation that comes and goes like a barely witnessed flash flood, to pale, commodified tableaux vivants designed as epic spectacles, butoh is all over the map.

This ambiguity has produced a continuous subtext of confusion and debate within butoh's global community. Discussions proliferate over whether certain performances of precisely set choreography or improvisational movement are more butoh than the other, how authentic a disciple is within a lineage depending on exactly when and how much time they spent with Hijikata Tatsumi, Ohno Kazuo, Ashikawa Yoko, Maro Akaji, or other older-generation artists, or even if certain otherwise venerated dancers should be accorded the butoh imprimatur at all.⁵ I have witnessed conversations wherein one artist tarred another (including myself!)⁶ with the scent of inauthenticity because the latter either only learned under someone adjacent to the commonly accepted pantheon of core lineage artists, worked with Hijikata for only a short period, or stylistically veered far afield of certain traditionalist aesthetic tropes. Such quandaries and arguments may be engrossing in the context of a panel discussion at a Euro-American festival or academic conference, or a late night, post-performance gathering at a Tokyo bar, but I'm not certain how much they actually move the practice forward.

Butoh's foundational artists were operating, if anything, in their historical moment and in the manner befitting their individual abilities, stories, and needs. I believe that we must keep the broader narrative in perspective if we are going to develop and uphold a functional standard that can keep the butoh community vibrant and relevant. Butoh artist Murobushi Ko states, "I think butoh is closer to a philosophy. Philosophy thinks about what art is, and butoh is very influenced by European thought about art. Each butoh artist has their own aspect or opinion or position" (2012).

As butoh artist Tamano Hiroko responds when asked what butoh is,

"Who are you?" this book is a dance in the mirror to delve painstakingly through that reflected image as a communal by-product of my experience and that of select other artists, and ask, "Who am I now?" I address this question via permutations that, while limited by my subjectivity, are also made possible by it. In light of the many creative and intellectual practitioners active in the growing field of butoh studies, I defer to others who are better equipped than I to parse through the vast sea of esoteric criteria around form, technique, history, culture, and identity. It is also beyond the scope of this project to begin adequately recognizing the long-undervalued histories of, and still growing efforts to make space for, the global spectrum of female, queer, racialized, and disabled bodies in butoh, and to theorize their futures, let alone the culturalized, nationalist, and misogynist tendencies embedded in much of butoh's legacy.⁷ This book is also not intended as a primer on butoh practice, nor am I trying necessarily to prove what butoh has been, is, or should be. While I make efforts to be clear regarding my sources, to frame my subjects' and informants' words with respect, my research and decades-long artistic practice are also simply jumping-off points around a very particular idea of butoh that is both completely personal and endemically social. In a sense, I don't care what butoh is. My concern is that in this age of increasing mediatization of everyday life and globalized, socioeconomic stratification, we as hybrid artists and scholars continue to speak from the idiosyncratic truth of lived practices and examine their potential for more complex, penetrating, and discerning communication. What matters to me are the particular forces that led to butoh's inception and initial phase, how and why butoh developed along certain principles and routes, and how it might expand in the future as a mode of trans-disciplinary dialogue between individuals and society. Thus, this "it" is what I hope to reveal and even, if necessary, invent.

With this approach in mind, my intellectual definition of butoh for the purposes of this book is practical, philosophical, and theoretical: *a process of subjectively engaging, embodying, and expressing chaos, contradiction, and crisis for the purpose of psycho-physiological and/or psycho-social awareness and transformation.* This is my own definition and not one that I have otherwise read or encountered. It is designed to encompass key aspects of butoh's myriad histories, practices, and values and initiate the direction of this book. The chapters herein theorize ways to comprehend, devise, and employ new and imagined bodies

in crisis. Chapter 1 lays out elements of post-World War Two Japanese art and culture from which butoh arose and drew inspiration. In chapter 2, I draw on butoh's relationship with photography to reveal butoh as a recursive sociopolitical practice rooted in subjectively imagined embodiments and structured by a particularly sensual and mysterious body/image dialectic. Chapter 3 begins the work of reimagining butoh by reframing its principles beyond the confines of its historical roots and into broader discourses, laying out the core concepts of a theory I call *an empty room*. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 explore three primary elements of my theory: *desire*, *trickster*, and the *cultural commons*. These concepts act as touchstones and filters through which my futurizing images of butoh contact, converge, and integrate in order to move forward.

I conclude chapter 6 and the book with a critical examination of my collaborative performance, *Soil*, as a case study in imagining an application of this butoh-based theory. In this work, my collaborators and I attempted autobiographical, idiosyncratic embodiments of the cultural commons as well as *democracy* and *sustainability* in the sense, not of normative notions of majoritarian statist rule or reification of a moralizing status quo, but of multiple mutating subject positions navigating the rough seas of neoliberal globality, the early Cold War-era roots of which Hijikata and his brethren resisted. With a civic agenda for individual and collective empowerment, a butoh-based performance theory may inspire and embody strategies to address desire, potentialize being, and activate communal space and a multiplicitous social dialogue.

I argue that butoh practice may elicit, maintain, and nourish multiplicity within one's self, and thereby enable other individuals to attempt the same. I view butoh as a subjectivizing technology in resistance not only to late capitalism's corporatist lifestyle, but to any form of statist or authoritarian control. As José Esteban Muñoz describes, "The state understands the need to keep us from knowing ourselves, knowing our masses. It is ready, at the drop of the proverbial dime, to transform public transportation into policing machines, to call out thousands of cops to match thousands of activists, to wield clubs and fists" (2009, 64). In order to withstand such measures, butoh artists allow for ambiguity, illogic, and absurdity, resisting the conventional image machine of neoliberal globality with the type of customized, subject-forming, "slow learning" advocated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, what she refers to as "cooking the soul" (2012). To cultivate relevance to a larger community of artists,

butoh must surpass itself in order to be itself. Sooner or later, even the most iconic and accomplished of butoh artists and teachers must be transcended, with their model of multiplicitous and communal being inspiring new and unforeseen manifestations of intersectional, rhizomatic bodies in their own right. In short, I see butoh as a practice of resistant imagining dedicated to memory, power, and difference. Through translocal, transcultural, and transnational personal narratives, butoh artists imagine worlds beyond resolution that they can embody or in which they desire to live.

I should also state that I do not necessarily anticipate succeeding in my goal. I cannot say with certainty that manifesting a more democratic or sustainable body through butoh practice is achievable. If we think of such bodies as ideal states of being, they become contradictions in terms. If we approach them, however, as permutations of an ever-manifesting process tumbling through disparate, dialogic permutations, as butoh practice has always been, then there is an opportunity for activating butoh's generative nature. I view butoh in much the same way that Muñoz posits queerness as a nonexistent yet futurizing and utopic ideality, "a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present" (1). For me, butoh is a bodily utopia rooted in and made possible by irresolution. Butoh is a contradiction. It is the fact that it can never be. The butoh practitioner wields the outward manifestation of myriad identities and identifications; that which they desire but cannot be all at once. Performing butoh is expressing the fact that one's multitudes may never exist as a whole, yet this is what we each can and must do.

Moreover, the practical driving force of my project is a performance of my thesis based in the belief that one can only answer this inquiry through embodiment—to do in principle what other butoh artists have done before and what many artists have stated to me over the years: namely, *find your own butoh*.

Or, as I once witnessed Zen teacher Paul Genki Kahn advise to someone anxious to know how to resolve suffering, negativity, evil, and attachment, "Become the thing itself" (2007).

1 : DEVELOPING A PRACTICE

PUNCTUM: AN IMAGE IN CRISIS

Fall 1991. Kinokuniya Bookstore, Downtown Los Angeles.

All I can think is that this man is in pain. There's a large book in my hands with a cover photo that I don't understand. An old Japanese man holds a flower, twisted and bent, petals shriveled. His arms and hands curl inward to his concave chest. One shoulder droops low, withering. Twisted, asymmetrical, chaotic, his body struggles to stay upright. White makeup covers him in patches, as if lived in too long. Bright red lipstick and yellowed teeth, mouth half-open but somehow feeling agape, as if he has something to say, but without a sound, the words instead oozing, bleeding through all his pores.

On his eyelids, smears of sky blue, desperate for attention; rooted, not in attraction, but pity; a long-lost desire to be someone's queen for a day, or an hour, a minute even. An inexorable slide into decay.

And those eyes. Surrounded by thick, messy, black streaks trailing to the side, hopeful and despairing. He stares upward, longing, resigned, saintly.

It's obvious. He's dying. You're not supposed to watch this kind of thing happening. I can't keep my eyes off of him. People in the store are beginning to stare at me staring at this book.

I've never seen anything so beautiful.

A BEGINNING

That's what I felt then. Now, decades later, looking at the cover of the book, *Butoh: Dance of the Dark Soul* (1987), by photographer Ethan Hoffman and critic Mark Holborn, I notice how staged this photo is. The curve of the flower petals perfectly matching the arc of the lips, the fall of the hair, and the center point in the frame. No obvious tension in the large hands. The dancer's static pose in perfect focus seems tailored and held for the camera.

There is still, however, that expression.

Ohno Kazuo sees something. Heaven or God, perhaps, since he is a devout Christian, opening wide to take in the breath of angels. Or maybe a ghost, a lost or kindred soul that fills him with childlike awe and aged exhaustion. I still feel a visceral, potentialized space opening up every time I see this photo. Ohno seems intimidated and anxious for what comes next, engendering a sense of betweenness.

I may, however, be imposing my own predilections upon the image. In considering whether a photo is acting upon me or vice versa, I recall the competing desires among the first photographers in history, either to observe reality passively or actively to depict it. What many people assume is a conscious choice made by every photographer is, in fact, an existential question that has vexed artists and scholars to this day.

This passive/active binary is at the core of Roland Barthes's final book, *Camera Lucida* (1981), in which he describes the act of viewing photos through the binary of *studium* and *punctum*. He defines *studium* as the impression of a photo's generalizable qualities, the collective references within its place and time, and its cultural, political, aesthetic, scientific, or otherwise objective facts. Moreover, because *studium* is external, it impresses, even imposes, itself upon us: "The Photograph is violent . . . because on each occasion *it fills the sight by force*, and because in it nothing can be refused or transformed" (91). Conversely, arriving ambiguously within our being as a "wound," "prick," "little hole," or "cast of the dice," a photograph's *punctum* arises from imagination:

Nothing surprising, then, if sometimes, despite its clarity, the *punctum* should be revealed only after the fact, when the photograph is no longer in front of me and I think back on it. I may know

better a photograph I remember than a photograph I am looking at, as if direct vision oriented its language wrongly, engaging it in an effort of description which will always miss its point of effect, the *punctum*. (53)

The punctum effect incites desires, anxieties, or other emotions both to destabilize and inure memories, making every instance of punctum not only idiosyncratic and subjective, but potentially lasting. In *The Poetics of Space* (1958), Gaston Bachelard speaks of the power of such an effect—of poetry on psycho-physiological consciousness—to the point that it alters one’s lifelong perception of an image: “Great images have both a history and a prehistory; they are always a blend of memory and legend, with the result that we never experience an image directly. Indeed, every great image has an unfathomable oneiric depth to which the personal past adds special color” (1994, 33). Bachelard contends that dream-like images are unfathomable because, like punctum, they are unanswerable, a fact rooted in their purely internal logic and potential for particularity: “When I receive a new poetic image, I experience its quality of inter-subjectivity. I know that I am going to repeat it in order to communicate my enthusiasm. When considered in transmission from one soul to another, it becomes evident that a poetic image eludes causality” (xxiv).

While *Camera Lucida* meditates on photography’s meaning and function, the book is ultimately driven by Barthes’s relentless mourning around the death of his mother, with whom he had lived most of his life. His text is an intricately reasoned yet deeply sorrowful exploration of subjective truth as a way to deal with the shock of objective reality. Similarly, the prevalence of subjective expressive forms in the post-World War Two Japanese avant-garde were largely a response to authoritarian conditions imposed under the American occupation and then the new Japanese government and oligarchs, which constituted much of the strange brew in which butoh developed. Much like many post-bebop jazz artists in the same era, the first butoh artists felt that they had a voice to reclaim and a struggle worth fighting. Like so many postwar societies reshaped by the Allied victors, theirs was an ambivalent liberty redolent with racial hierarchies undergirding capitalist superstructures of upwardly mobile consumerism. In the midst of Japan’s rapid Westerniza-

tion, butoh artists reimagined and retooled the performing body and the contested Japanese identity that it represented. Hijikata Tatsumi, butoh's creator and primary driving force in its formative decades, explored an imagined, premodern Japanese past, excavating the image of a broken, dying, nativist body as a myth with utility specific to the conditions of Japanese neocolonial subjects in the Cold War era.

Kinjiki (Forbidden Colors) was the first explicit step in this journey. Hijikata's sexually violent dance duet with Ohno Yoshito, the twenty-one-year-old son of butoh cofounder Ohno Kazuo, premiered in May 1959. Titled after a Mishima Yukio novel, *Kinjiki* featured Hijikata's character attempting to molest Ohno, who ostensibly smothered a chicken between his legs.¹ Now legendary in butoh history, *Kinjiki* was butoh's forbidden fruit; a first salvo and declaration of independence of the movement.

Notorious for giving contradictory accounts about himself, Hijikata spent much of his life spinning tales that fed his public persona. In the decade following *Kinjiki*, he became who he wanted or needed to be, what others wanted from him, or all of the above. Hijikata also was not the only one playing this game. Numerous subversive artists of the period, such as Jean-Luc Godard, Bob Dylan, or Andy Warhol, just to name a few, spent the same late 1950s through late 1960s period dissecting and rejecting the totalizing authority of their Modernist forebears. Eventually running out of "tricks," they were then forced to make positive statements—to actually say something—by the end of the 1960s, when, after exploding onto their respective art scenes, they each retreated within a world of their own making.

Of course, looking back to a time when I was just born, in a culture once removed and a country an ocean away, is an act of imagination, like staring into a faded magic lantern image or straining my ear into a broken harmonium, trying to commune with a beyond that yet lies always already within oneself, to find out where and how the past and future live in the here and now.

In other words, *You weren't there, Michael. How could you possibly know what you're talking about?*

I don't. That's the point.