

Cristina Elias*

Fabulating the Japanese Body Inside and Beyond Performance and Choreography Through Butoh

31 dicembre 2020, pp. 181-200

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2036-1599/11891>

Section: Studi [peer reviewed]



Articles are published under a Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial 3.0 Unported licence (Authors retain copyright in their articles, permission to reuse third party copyrighted content is not included).

Email: danzaericerca@unibo.it

Www: <https://danzaericerca.unibo.it/>

Abstract

Attraverso l'analisi del processo creativo della performance *Pele* in cui avviene una continua negoziazione tra interno e esterno del corpo, l'articolo si interroga sulla genesi dell'individuo. Si procede poi con la descrizione delle nuove modalità di training del butō, le quali inducono ad un ritrovato stato di connettività corporea per poi basarsi sulle teorie non-dualistiche proposte dalla studiosa Christine Greiner in *Fabulations of the Japanese Body and its micro-activisms*, trovando così una sorta di "semi-equilibrio" grazie al mantenimento dell'agitazione interna, causata a sua volta dallo scontro degli opposti che mantiene uno stato vivo e pulsante.

In this article, I question the genesis of the self one perceives as such, by approaching the creative process of the performance *Pele*, which, through movement, video and text, operates a continued matching of apparently opposing elements such as inside and outside of the body, *I* and other, body and mind, individual and collective. I describe how recent butoh training experiences have offered as a pathway for achieving a corporeal state of connectedness. Based on the procedural non-dualistic theory proposed Christine Greiner in *Fabulations of the Japanese Body and its micro-activisms*, the aim not to erase nor solve the tensions deriving from these encounters, but to give way to these questionings and consequent agitation, maintaining the diversities alive, in a state of *quasi-balance*.

* PUC-Pontificia Universidade Católica of São Paulo, Brasil.

Cristina Elias

Fabulating the Japanese Body Inside and Beyond Performance and Choreography Through Butoh

Introduction



Fig. 1: Still of *Pele* (video-performance, November 2019).

*Pele*¹ is an audio-visual performance² with live manipulation of images of the present body that moves and dialogues with the recorded moving images of its own self (the virtual body) in this same situation³. In this work, I question the concept of a *self* as a finished unit, shaped in a format that

1. The video of the full performance is available online at <https://vimeo.com/379034516>, integral version, 20 min (accessed 23/9/2020).

2. Concept, choreography, performance, direction: Cristina Elias; live video: César Meneghetti; camera, video montage, post-production: Karla da Costa; costume: Cecília Echenique.

3. *Pele* was performed for the first time at the Festival of Art and Technology ARTECH – Digital Media Art Ecosys-



Fig. 2: *Pele*, live performance, ARTECH 2019, Braga, Portugal. Photo: Sónia Guggisberg.

excludes everything that is outside the limits of the epidermis by means of constantly making myself available to relate with elements that are immediately felt as external to the body such as the ground and the walls of the space in which the action takes place, the clothes, the video image that is projected on the image of the present body, the voice(s) heard, the multilayered soundscape of text recorded in four different languages, and, in a broader spectrum, the very skin that surrounds the fleshly body.

This purposeful exposure, metaphorically represented in the performance by the act of undressing a heavy dress, thus requires a state of openness, of permeability, where the body-mind is repeatedly invaded by external stimuli (the «what dresses me» that is constantly repeated along the whole performance), making of these invasions, triggers for movement, for creativity, for transformation.

In fact, what is being problematized is not the material existence of dualities such as in and out, *I* and other, individual and collective, but the genesis, the process of configuration of what one perceives as *self*. By confronting apparently opposing elements, my intention is not to erase nor solve the *tensions* deriving from their encounter, but to, exactly, give way to these questionings and consequent *agitation*,

tems, Braga (Portugal), October 2019. Curatorship: Priscila Arantes. Online: www.2019.artech-international.org (accessed 23/9/2020).

maintaining these diversities alive, in a state of *quasi-balance*.

In *Fabulations of the Japanese Body and its Microactivisms*⁴, Christine Greiner proposes a mode of capturing reality not as «substantive things» but as «processes»⁵: «that which exists, does not refer to things already done, but to things being done – might these things be bodies, individuals, images or ideas»⁶. Every reality is a flux, a process, and, therefore, «it is not only about understanding how ideas are made but about what we make of them»⁷. In the article that follows, I look at *Pele*, within this non-dualistic and procedural frame of “fabulations” and illuminating its creative process through the lens of recent butoh experiences I had with contemporary Japanese butoh artists currently active, namely, Seki Minako⁸, Kaseki Yuko⁹ and Fukuhara Tetsuro¹⁰.

I and the Japanese Body: Imagining Realities

Within the last nine years¹¹, I have approached some aspects of Japanese body-mind techniques, having my interest more focused on principles that guide the creation processes of artists than on the finished and resulting artworks themselves. My training/creative process is, therefore, strongly influenced by such techniques¹², which inexorably lead to a certain way of apprehending and understanding life and art.

Although there is no unified category that may be called Japanese Aesthetics¹³, there is a collection of principles that together form a certain notion of Japanese aesthetics¹⁴. So, beauty in Japan would

4. Christine Greiner, *Fabulações do Corpo Japonês e seus microativismos (Fabulations of the Japanese Body and its Microactivisms)*, n-1 edições, São Paulo 2017.

5. *Ivi*, p. 41.

6. *Ibidem*.

7. *Ibidem*. Greiner asserts that these way of thinking is in tune with the theories of authors such as William James, Gilbert Simondon, Charles Sanders Peirce, the Body-Media theory by Katz and Greiner and the activist theory of Brian Massumi, among other theories whose «aptitude is, above all, methodologic[.] Consisting deliberately of experiences, such theories opt for not applying abstractions nor categorizations given *a priori* but to work with singular modes of acting, which, in their turn, are ways of feeling and of constituting one's self».

8. Butoh artist living and working in Berlin. For more information cf. <http://minakoseki.com/> (accessed 23/9/2020).

9. Butoh artist living and working in Berlin. For more information cf. <http://www.cokaseki.com/> (accessed 23/9/2020).

10. Butoh artist living and working in Tokyo. For more information cf. <http://sde-museum.com/> (accessed 23/9/2020)

11. Since I participated in the creation of the Noh Opera *Matsukaze* (2011) by Sasha Waltz and Guests and Hosokawa Toshio as assistant of direction. Afterwards, between 2012 and 2014, in Berlin and Rome, I had the opportunity to train butoh with some second and third generation masters. Also in Berlin, I participated in physical training based on the aikido technique taught by Prof. Martin Gruber of the Ernst Busch Faculty of Performing Arts. In 2020, I completed a PhD in Design, in which I propose a procedural method for design creation based on an aesthetic marked by zen buddhist principles and, since 2019, I am a member of the Center for Oriental Studies at PUC São Paulo.

12. Namely butoh, aikido and zen buddhist meditation. Although I see the three of these body-mind techniques as closely connected and dialoguing, in this article I will focus on my experiences with butoh.

13. According to Christine Greiner, until the XIX century the Japanese did not think of drafting an aesthetic theory. This conceptual preoccupation only arose in Japan with the presence of academic orientlists in the country. Cf. Christine Greiner, *Fabulações do Corpo Japonês e seus microativismos*, cit., p. 49.

14. Cf. Donald Richie, *A tractate on Japanese aesthetics*, Stone Bridge Press, Berkeley 2007 and Christine Greiner, *Fabulações do Corpo Japonês e seus microativismos*, cit.

be linked to the idea of expanding the individual to a sort of *more-than-I* sphere, that leads to *transformation*, closely associated with *connection* to the other¹⁵. Besides, this aesthetic universe would also involve ways of communicating and perceiving that go beyond rational and verbal explanation and systematization.

One path I found for approaching this constellation of principles is *butoh*: «An art form that demands that artists put themselves into continually new relationships and allow themselves to be invaded by others as a way to tirelessly search for actuality»¹⁶.

In *butoh* training/performance, I could detect a form of *yield and push* process, which in the strict context of performance materializes as movement of the body but that might be conceptually stretched to innumerable other areas both still in the artistic field but also in the social, collective, psychological, existential aspects of life itself. In this process, *yielding* does not configure a losing game but a stance where potential energy is gathered for reaction. The *pushing* of the body-mind out of its usual position or state metaphorically draws this reaction. The way *butoh* artists respond to «a world of increasing information» is to invert the immediate logic of «competition», which «implies a winner and a loser itself»: «Paradoxically, the very nature of competition [...] is now opposed to the goal of not letting one element within a competition overpower the others, but rather, holding them in tension within the mind»¹⁷.

Between the second half of the 1950s and the 1970s, Hijikata Tatsumi *planted* *butoh* as a system of training the body-mind to «rebel»¹⁸ against everything that could configure a constraint for its authenticity of creation and expression. Including here his own *self*: «Hijikata suspected that his own body-mind and its languages were covered in conventions and concepts, which stood in the way of his seeing the world accurately»¹⁹. Rebellious, in this context, is strictly connected to transformation and this transformation would be the result of an opening of the defenses, a lowering of the “armor” one carries around his own *self*, the assumption of fragility as a gate to empathy.

Greiner points out a «fabulating function, triggered by the path of emotions and, therefore, particularly potent to create displacements, inventing different ways of seeing and feeling life»²⁰. It is not a matter of copying nor seeking to learn something exactly the way it is done by a particular tradition, on the contrary, the value of fabulation would be precisely in keeping «distant from what would be

15. «Beauty could connect us to others, in a desire for sharing and empathy, but not everything involved in what is considered a “manifestation of beauty” could be described, such as the poems by the monk Dōgen (1220-1253)». Yasunari Kawabata, *Japan the beautiful and myself*, Kodansha International, Tokyo 1969, in Christine Greiner, *Fabulações do Corpo Japonês e seus microativismos*, cit., p. 64.

16. Bruce Baird, *Hijikata Tatsumi and Butoh: Dancing in a Pool of Grey Grits*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2012, p. 218.

17. *Ivi*, pp. 3-4.

18. Reference to Hijikata's solo *Hijikata Tatsumi and Japanese People: Rebellion of the Body* of 1968.

19. Bruce Baird, *Hijikata Tatsumi and Butoh: Dancing in a Pool of Grey Grits*, cit., p. 9.

20. Christine Greiner, *Fabulações do Corpo Japonês e seus microativismos*, cit., p. 73.

considered the truth or the origin to be reached»²¹. It is a «co-composition» with living that opens «paths» for the continuous transformation and presentification of the past²². Through fabulating one is actually opening, broadening his view beyond his own individual reach. It is an act of embodying *otherness*, «as if the discovery of the other would ensure the invention of the *self* in a continuous flux, forever unfinished, having empathy as its departure point and no longer the dichotomy *I* and the *other*»²³. By fabulating one is involved in a certain «instance of falsehood» which does not constitute a «deliberate lye» but that stems from imagination. Every fabulation is also a «corporeal state» that emerges from «imaginative processes mediated by the organism and the environments (sign networks) through which it moves»²⁴.

Thus, in my creative process, I am not referring to false memories nor invented facts about Japan but to a personal experience of processes and principles of some Japanese techniques, which involves the displacement of these same processes and principles from their original material universe to another one. By fabulating a certain Japanese body, I am also distancing myself from my field of habitude, from the vision or conception of mind and body, individual and collective, inside and outside, which underlie my own construction of *self* and, thus, making myself available and permeable to different viewpoints and potential transformations.

The Power of Imagination

In 2008, the British Museum held an exhibition entitled *Garden & Cosmos: The Royal Paintings of Jodhpur*²⁵ with classic Indian drawings, among them the *Cosmic Oceans* series. These *Oceans* graphically consist of unfinished circles that are born from the encounter between other circles but that never reach completion. An open shape that gives rise to another shape and another shape and another and another. So, that these shapes are all integrated in a much broader design, which goes beyond the limits of the catalogue page, or the paper on which the figure was engraved and, in the case of this exhibition, of the extensive murals that were reserved for them at the British Museum.

In the case of the circles of *Cosmic Oceans*, the beginning of a new circle leads to the imagination of a point of origin that deviates from the previous original point giving rise to one or another circle that is drawn from a displaced center. Here we see a principle of construction of an individuality in the collective, so that the individual is pulverized in an endless web of forms that are related and that generate others that are still themselves but with a certain overflow of their original contours.

21. *Ibidem*.

22. *Ibidem*.

23. *Ivi*, p. 12.

24. *Ivi*, p. 74.

25. Cf. Debra Diamond – Catherina Glynn – Karni Singh Jasol (edited by), *Garden & Cosmos: The Royal Paintings of Jodhpur*, catalogue of the exhibition, Thames and Hudson, London 2008.



Fig. 3: *Cosmic Oceans, Garden & Cosmos: The Royal Paintings of Jodhpur*, catalogue of the exhibition, Thames and Hudson, London 2008, pp. 252-253.

In Japan, the very notion of person integrates this idea. *Ningen* (person in Japanese) is the union between *nin* (man) and *gen* as «space or in-between (*aida*)»²⁶. *Aida* means «space between men»²⁷. Being integrated in the concept of *ningen* (person), *aida* supports both the construction of relationships in Japanese society and the construction of the *self*. The concept of person in Japan, therefore, has less to do with a supposed «substantial center» of a given person than with «a dynamic sphere where people are interconnected»²⁸.

This assertion is strengthened by the concept of *fudô*, worked on by the Japanese philosopher Watsuji Tetsuro²⁹, whose ideogram is the combination of wind and earth³⁰. *Fûdo* was translated by

26. Henk Oosterling, *A culture of the "Inter": the Japanese notions of ma and bashô*, in Henk Oosterling – Heiz Kimmerle (edited by), *Sensus communis in multicultural and intercultural perspective*, Königshausen & Neumann, Würzburg 2000, pp. 61-84: p. 74.

27. Bin Kimura, *Hito to hito to no aida (The space between men)*, Kôbundô, Tokyo 2000 (I ed. 1972), in Okano Michiko, *MA: entre-espço da arte e comunicação no Japão (Ma: inter-space of art and communication in Japan)*, Anablume/Fapesp/Fundação Japão, São Paulo 2012, p. 76.

28. Henk Oosterling, *A culture of the "Inter"*, cit., p. 74.

29. Tetsuro Watsuji, *Fûdo: Ningenteki Kôsatsu (Fûdo: Philosophic Reflection)*, 1935, in Okano Michiko, *MA: entre-espço da arte e comunicação no Japão*, cit., p. 66.

30. Okano Michiko, *MA: entre-espço da arte e comunicação no Japão*, cit., p. 66.

Augustin Berque into French as *milieu* (medium)³¹. According to Berque, the *milieu* is the relationship between society, space and nature. Note that the concept of *milieu* differs from *environnement* (environment), which refers to the objective dimension of the world, to the sum of objects, materials and quantifiable information that are somehow received by man. *Milieu* is also distinguished from the landscape that represents the subjective and inter-subjective dimensions of nature. It is a perceptual projection of a subject influenced by historical and cultural factors on the environment that surrounds him. The *milieu* is a relationship between humanity and what it has geographically received. As it is a relationship, it changes over time, it is always in process, consisting of something physical as well as phenomenological.

I see in *Cosmic Oceans* a reflection of this continuous process of becoming which was an inspiration for the construction of *Pele*. In *Pele*, I tried to convey the principle of these drawings to movement and image: a series of circularities that tie together, interpenetrate, overflow each other, generating others and others and others. It is a repetition of forms in a dynamic web of processes, that, in reality, does not indicate doing the same thing again and again but doing something with a slight displacement of its center.

In the first part of *Pele*, in which the position of the body is kneeling, the spine begins to move mimicking the movement of a wave that originates initially in the perineum and gradually moves up to the cardiac plexus (heart) and third eye (point in the head between the eyebrows).

In Japan, the word used to indicate the *heart* is *kokoro*. *Kokoro*, however, does not refer to a single organ, muscle or anatomic element in the body. This concept points out to a process of connecting different centers of the body (and the principles and concepts they embody), with no hierarchies between such: all of them are essential in their combined functioning in the body-mind system³². Seki Minako, right at the beginning of her butoh workshops, highlights the location of *kokoro* in the body: one point in the perineum, another in the chest (which is equivalent to the heart as known in western culture tradition) and another one in the third eye, reflecting the energy centers of the Chinese tradition³³. The way covered by the wave movement in *Pele*, from the perineum to the third eye, tries to connect the centers of the body included in the universe of *kokoro* as well as their representations in what regards to meaning and function.

31. Cf. Augustin Berque, *Écoumène, introduction à l'étude des milieux humains*, Belin, Paris 2000 and Augustin Berque, *Médiance: de milieux en paysages*, Belin-Reclus, Paris 2000 (II ed.).

32. Regarding the meaning of *Kokoro*, cf. Meera Viswanathan, *Kokoro*, online: <https://www.rep.routledge.com/articles/thematic/kokoro/v-1> (accessed 20/9/2020); Shohaku Okomura, *What is kokoro?*, in *Lion's Roar*, 2018, online: <https://www.lionsroar.com/dharma-dictionary-kokoro/> (accessed 29/1/2020).

33. According to Seki, in the Chinese tradition there are three main energy centers – *dantien* – which are equivalent to the points covered by the concept of *kokoro*. The Japanese term *tandem*, which means “elixir field” or “area where life is created”, comes from Chinese *dantien*. However, in the current language of the body arts in Japan, when talking about *tandem*, we are referring only to the point located in the perineum. Workshop *We are hanging*, held at Dock 11, Berlin in 2012. Oral communication.



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6

Fig. 4, 5 and 6: Photographs of the live video projection of *Pele*, ARTECH 2019, Braga, Portugal. Photo: César Meneghetti.

Actually, *Kokoro* refers to all human activities that affect the world through «intention, emotion and intellect»³⁴. *Kokoro* is a process, an action that involves perception by means of mind, feelings and emotions. *Kokoro* is the process of «opening the heart and at the same time the spirit and reason»³⁵. So, Seki's gestural definition of *kokoro* indicates a form of perception that exceeds vision (but does not exclude it) as a dominant sense; which breaks with the Cartesian logic of the world interpretation and which replaces reality seen and rationally understood with a reality that is built through the *perceptive-creative* action of a *feeling-imagining-subject*.

The wave movements in *Pele* do not stop at the top of the head, like the web of incomplete semi-circles of the drawing *Cosmic Oceans*, which do not end in the borders of the paper where they are drafted but point out to their continuation beyond this platform. When I perform and imagine this web of movements, I see (imagine) them expanding from the top of my head, as if the movement, such as a wave, dissipates through space. This *drawing* of circles that surpasses the limits of the *canvas-skin* is in tune with the way butoh artists perceive their bodies and the environment: «We normally consider as a body everything that is bounded and contained by the skin. However, this idea of the body is only an illusion, because the body expands outside the skin unlimitedly»³⁶.

In 2020, during the quarantine, I participated in several online butoh training sessions with Kaseki Yuko and Seki Minako. In all of these sessions, the basic frame of movement proposed was waving the spine, however, with different qualities, velocities, directions, planes, heights, textures, intentions and, mainly, different *imaginations* of contexts and landscapes.

Kaseki's workshop was named *The traces of fragility*³⁷. According to her, the aim was

34. Shohaku Okomura, *What is kokoro?*, cit.

35. Martin Gruber, *Form and change: acting as path-based on the example of aikido and other types of body work*, 2010, p. 5, online: http://www.aiki-extensions.org/pubs/martin_gruber.pdf (accessed 29/1/2020).

36. Kasai Akira, during a workshop of eurhythm and butoh dance in Tuscania, July 2011, in Maria Pia D'Orazi, *Il butō in Italia e l'esperienza di Kasai Akira*, in Matteo Casari – Elena Cervellati (edited by), *Butō. Prospettive europee e sguardi dal Giappone*, Dipartimento delle Arti – Alma Mater Studiorum-Università di Bologna, Bologna 2015, pp. 133-147: pp. 139-140.

37. Yuko Kaseki, *The traces of Fragility*, online workshop held in June/July 2020 (five weekends, 3 days per weekend). In

to listen to the shallowness and depth of your breath, the fulfilled sound around you, and find an accumulation of the dust. Carve it into your body so that you don't forget the moment when your relationship with your body and surrounding is abundant. Warm-up for the permeable body, and awake sensitivity of inner and outer. We will jump into improvisation with elements and themes. Dance through your membrane to connect with distanced others³⁸.

The first sessions of the workshop started exactly with the repetition of waves in the spine, starting in the lower spine, up to the top of the head. The waves in the spine were led by the imagination of a body filled with water. The presence of water should not only be imagined inside the body but also outside, as if the body were filled with the same element in which it was moving: water in both sides of the skin, passing through the *membrane*. I consider this imagination guideline by Kaseki a reflection of the dynamic connectedness between individual and environment present in the aforementioned theory of *fudô (milieu)*, that is, a relationship between humanity and what it has geographically received³⁹.

With the continued repetition of waves, this movement should start expanding to the other edges of the body (upper and lower limbs, hands, feet) and it should as well spread *water* out in space and not only in its liquid state, but also transformed into *gas*. Participants should feel (imagine the feeling of) the dissipation of the water particles in space, the different dynamics the transformed water element could assume both inside the limits of the skin as well as passing through it and invading the air outside. The other way round of this flow, that is, the transit of water in its liquid or gaseous state into the inside should also be included in this exercise, so that the exchange and dynamics involving body and environment was constant.

The next level of completion of this exercise led to the repeated displacement of the «center of the body» in a vertical line along the spine: «Imagine your center moved to your chest»⁴⁰. Here, I make a parallel between Kaseki's directive of imagining that «the center of the body moved» with that which Gilbert Simondon named «pre-individuality» as well as the process of individuation in his theory. The *self* in Simondon constantly recreates itself by «dividing» into «phases»⁴¹. These fragmentations, deviations or overflows of the *self*; however, do not happen in an absolutely random way, but follow a structure or direction, which Simondon calls «pre-individuality»⁴²:

this chapter, the following quotations of Kaseki were taken from these workshop sessions.

38. Email with invitation/presentation of the workshop *The traces of Fragility* sent by Yuko Kaseki on June 6th, 2020.

39. «In fact Butoh artists, cultivated a panoply of body-mind techniques, which were useful in staging dances, and can also help us understand the wider society around them». Bruce Baird, *Hijikata Tatsumi and Butoh: Dancing in a Pool of Grey Grits*, cit., p. 6.

40. Here Kaseki meant «move your center *from the perineum* to your chest». Like in Minako Seki, the main center in the body in Kaseki's method is located in the perineum. So when she says *center* with no other specifications, she means the general use of *tandem* in Japan, which as mentioned previously in this article, refers to the Chinese *dantien* but, in current use, points out to a main center in the perineum.

41. Gilbert Simondon, *La individuación: a la luz de las nociones de forma y de información*, Caciús/LaCebra, Buenos Aires 1989, p. 27.

42. *Ibidem*.

the pre-individual being is the being in which there is no phase, the being within which an individuation is consumed is the one in which a resolution appears to divide the being into phases, the one which is to become; becoming is not a milestone in which being exists; it is a dimension of being; way of solving an initial potential-rich incompatibility⁴³.

With the escalation of the movement, Kaseki said one should «get lost in the waves» and that these waves did not have to «be the whole time smooth. They can be fragmented, confused»⁴⁴. Fragmenting here also involved the fragmentation of the feeling of the spine as a whole.

Divide the spine in two halves. From the coccyx to the heart and from heart to head top. Wave the spine first in the lower half. Then only from the heart to the top of the head. Then alternate both. Sometimes fuse both halves, do the wave from the coccyx all the way to the top of the head. Sometimes break in the middle and come back⁴⁵.

Besides division into *phases* and the displacement of the center so that the *self*, the body, the movement, is always becoming another, which I pair with Simondon's theory, I see in these directives given for the performance of the wave movement a concrete application of the aforementioned *kokoro* both in what regards to the centers and areas of the body it covers but also regarding its procedural and *connectedness* qualities. The water metaphor, which in Kaseki's training is strongly present, also leads to this process of *opening* and providing a *permeable* body. She repeats several times along the sessions that the body should be «floating» and «soaking»⁴⁶. This means again that water is present both inside (the body is soaked in water) and outside of the body (the space is filled with water). So, according to Kaseki, the body should float when in a state of expansion and soak when in a state of retention. It is a fact that several dance and movement techniques are built upon the repeated exchange from retention to expansion states of the body. Differentiating in Kaseki's approach is the way the process of expansion is perceived and imagined: In expansion, which points out to an opening the body, one should imagine he is «taking the space outside inwards»⁴⁷. The other way round also works: In retention, one can imagine he is throwing the space inside outwards. All of this, bearing in mind that «space is not only the air around you, close to your body. It can be far away»⁴⁸. According to Kaseki's perception of space, it can even «relate to objects»⁴⁹.

In one of the last sessions of the workshop⁵⁰, Kaseki proposed a *hiding and showing* or *appearing and disappearing* or even *watching and being watched* sort of game to be played among the participants. Here one should act conscious of the fact that someone is watching him/her and that he/she is at the

43. *Ibidem*.

44. Yuko Kaseki, *The traces of Fragility*, online workshop held in June 2020. Oral source.

45. *Ibidem*.

46. *Ibidem*.

47. *Ibidem*.

48. *Ibidem*.

49. *Ibidem*.

50. June 27th, 2020.

same time watching someone. «I exist because something notices I exist and because I notice this something»⁵¹. With this phrase I believe Kaseki means that one's existence depends on the look of the other, on something that belongs to *non-self* perceiving one's *self* and on this same *self* perceiving that there is someone or something that perceives it. Existing depends on connection and relation. Here, there was also a *forced* innovation in perspective of how presence and connectedness between people and also the relation between people and environment take place. As the workshop was online, the dynamics between participants was held through technological tools. People involved in this *perceiving the self and the other* game proposed by Kaseki were also involved in developing other ways of weaving relationships with others, with the space, with their own images and, in consequence, other ways of constructing their *selves* in collective experiences.

Seki Minako also works within this dynamic constellation of connectivity, of transformation, focusing mainly on the effect of imagination in movement: «The Seki method departs from imagination and the endless possibilities of it. Through imagination we can connect consciousness with unconsciousness, as well as micro cosmos with macro cosmos. Imagination is our creative impulse and our motor for artistic expression»⁵².

In July 2020, Seki held an online workshop named *Power of imagination*⁵³, which was divided in three sessions, each of them dedicated to transforming into a different *non-human* being: snake («snakes and their muscles»), seaweed and bird («all body as bird's neck»). According to Seki, «imagination and perception are unique». She explains this assertion telling that «last night» she observed a «red moon» and saw a «bloody moon». She questions if other people also saw the moon red and also immediately connected it to blood. The «uniqueness of perception and imagination» is what «makes your dance something very special» and provides power to expression⁵⁴.

In *Power of Imagination*, form and technique of movement compose the first phase of each session, and here it should be noted that participants have already a picture of a non-human being in mind, for example a snake... After exhaustive repetition and individual experimentation with this form, she starts giving directions for enhancing the imaginative weight of the action, such as the performance of a dialogue with another being (in this strange body or existence that was being practiced up to then) so that each individual plays both parts in the conversation, the *I* and the *other*, with continued confusions between both. The piece being created is the performance, this process where imagination and form are applied concomitantly with no separation possibilities. «The relationship between body

51. *Ibidem*.

52. Seki's method essential concepts. Cf. <http://minakoseki.com/basic-principles-of-the-seki-method/> (accessed 9/9/2020).

53. *Power of imagination serie* (Part 6), online workshop held on 10, 11, 12 July 2020.

54. Minako Seki, *Power of imagination Serie* (Part 6), online workshop. Oral introduction to the first training session. Online: <https://www.youtube.com/user/butohberlin> (accessed 9/9/2020).

and imagination occupies the heart of Butoh»⁵⁵. It is important to highlight that it is a “relationship” between body and imagination that form the infrastructure of butoh: the dance «emerges in the moment when imagination binds to the body and makes it transform». And it’s no longer about «what it is possible to do with the body», but it concerns «how one relates to the body»⁵⁶.

Seki’s routine for training, despite its connection with imagination and imaginary creation, is extremely technical in what regards body movement. It is in the repetition of a given pattern or of some detailed guidelines for performing a movement that imagination starts to play its role. The waving of the spine for example, as already mentioned previously, is a present element in Seki’s method. In the case of *Power of Imagination*, it was used in different intensities, directions, planes, and, like in Kaseki Yuko, being displaced to different parts of the body that would assume the role of its «center». However, what really differentiated the movement being repeated was the «imaginary landscape»⁵⁷ each performer created. In Seki’s method, imagination and form intertwine, growing, developing or transforming together and each other.

Outstanding in Seki’s method, is also the constant presence of a bouncing movement, in which I see a *yield and push* process (yield to gravity and push the floor; yield to a certain force and use this impulse to move to another direction), that Seki applies to almost every part of her training sessions, from the warm-up to the creative improvisation, bearing in mind that both in Kaseki Yuko and Seki Minako, the warm-up generally flows to the performance with no strict separations.

Seki Minako, such as Kaseki Yuko, uses extensively the metaphor of water to conceive movement. She expressly connects «bouncing» to water, referring to a «water bag body»⁵⁸. According to her, as our bodies are 80% made of water, and, therefore, we are constantly bouncing water particles. When we imagine we are «bags filled with water» and feel the qualities of this water bag in our bodies, «we are able to react to the impulses and to all that surrounds us and find a very intense quality of movement [...] When we let our body fall in the direction of gravity, we will get automatically a bouncing reaction. The re-bounce reaction of a fall is the dynamic of the dancing body»⁵⁹. By bouncing and exploring this

55. Maria Pia D’Orazi, *Il butō in Italia e l’esperienza di Kasai Akira*, cit., p. 139.

56. Kasai Akira during a workshop in Rome, May 2014, in Maria Pia D’Orazi, *Il butō in Italia e l’esperienza di Kasai Akira*, cit., p. 139.

57. Minako Seki, *Power of imagination Serie* (Part 6), online workshop. Oral source.

58. Seki’s method essential concepts. Cf. <http://minakoseki.com/basic-principles-of-the-seki-method/> (accessed 9/9/2020). This idea of “water bag body” stems from a method of training named *Noguchi Taiso*, which was systematized by Michizo Noguchi in Japan in the same period when Hijikata Tatsumi was developing his butoh technique. Several butoh dancers, including Hijikata Tatsumi, drew upon principles and techniques of *Noguchi Taiso*, in order to add to their movement a quality of softness and fluidity. That is, in order to do a certain action one should not use more energy or effort than what is necessary for this specific action. Here, embracing gravity and not fighting against it is one of the core principles. For more information on *Noguchi Taiso* cf. Paola Esposito – Toshiharu Kasai, *Butoh Dance, Noguchi Taiso and Healing*, in Vicky Karkou – Sue Oliver – Sophia Lycouris (edited by), *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Wellbeing*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2017, pp. 255-272.

59. *Ibidem*.



Fig. 7: Still of *Pele* (video-performance, November 2019).

movement at «physical, relational and emotional levels» one can develop a «language to communicate what is alive»⁶⁰.

With regards to the process of creation of *Pele*, despite this «bouncing» being present as a principle for action in the performance as a whole, there was a specific moment which I believe is worth noting as it involves the reformulation of a lived experience in performance not by representation nor literary narration, but by means of its re-reading through a set of perceptual tools combined with imaginative content. And here again, what was object of recreation in the performance was not a fixed image nor closed story of what I had lived but the sensations and impressions I embodied by having gone through that process.

By the time of the video recording, there was a white-painted brick wall behind me. On the ceiling, a cavity made for fitting a fan. Through this cavity, a beam of sunlight reflected on the white of the wall, being interrupted cyclically, rhythmically, by the turning of the fan. The impression was that someone was constantly turning on and off a flashlight pointed in my direction.

It was not possible to exclude this blinking from the lens focus nor cut it in the video editing phase. This error was then incorporated into the work. Not as a mistake, but as a creative trigger. The blink of light was transformed into a continuous trembling of the body that I prolonged until I could hardly do more. During this frantic bouncing, I found a point of sensibility in my chest. Instead of

60. Seki Minako in the presentation of the workshop *Bouncing* held in TanzKunstWerk, Bern 2019, online: <http://minakoseki.com/bouncing-workshop-2/> (accessed 9/9/2020).



Fig. 8: Still of *Pele* (video-performance, November 2019).

running away from that sensation, I decided to touch it, literally.

Later, when watching video in the edition phase, I identified the referred point of sensibility in the chest. Not long before filming *Pele*, I went through an inflammatory process with chronic pains that involved mainly my heart. I spent many days in hospital with tachycardia: acceleration of the heart rhythm, palpitation, a feeling of earthquake in the body. In the performance, the continued blinking of the light combined with the trembling of the body awoke a certain corporeal memory, which at the time of the performance I was not conscious of. I believe the improvised recreation of this memory in the present of the performance was largely enabled by the continuous butoh based body-mind training I have been practicing for years⁶¹.

In an article⁶² about the body-language of poetry, developed by the artist Yvonne Pouget⁶³, Margherita De Giorgi argues that «biographical narratives are turned into synesthetic compositional patterns», functioning as triggers for «deeply embodied experiences» which have effects on the «quality of presence and movement»⁶⁴. This is how Pouget «eventually» engages a «strong empathetic bond

61. Video images of my butoh based training. Online: <https://vimeo.com/391498199> (accessed 9/9/2020).

62. Margherita De Giorgi, *(Im)possible Maps, Poetical Inlands. Rereading the Legacy of ankoku butō in European Contemporary Aesthetics: The Works of Yvonne Pouget and Imre Thormann*, in Matteo Casari – Elena Cervellati (edited by), *Butō. Prospettive europee e sguardi dal Giappone*, cit., pp. 84-101.

63. «As a young woman, Pouget used to suffer from spasms and panic attacks, which were later on diagnosed as Post-traumatic Stress Disorders (PTSD). In more recent years, she was injured while rehearsing on stage. Since then, her feet and spine have been frustrating her with chronic pains. She consequently underwent psychoanalysis, surgical interventions and osteopathy, which she recalls as painful and yet useful experience for her ensuing self-discovery». *Ivi*, p. 85, footnote 35.

64. *Ivi*, p. 85.

with the audience»⁶⁵. Such «method» would emerge from «experiencing Butoh» and from a «rigorous practice induced and motivated by physical and emotional constraints»⁶⁶. Greiner puts this equation in terms of a «state of extreme precariousness» that «through movements, images and words [...] announces what a life can cause and activate»⁶⁷. In *Pele's* process, this corporeal memory emerged with a different tone from trauma: it was reinvented as poetic, acceptance and continuity, a sort of *yield and push* process where I was yielding to pain and using this impulse to change the direction, to transform.

Another butoh artist, whose training influences my creative process is Fukuhara Tetsuro. With his method called *Space Dance* – space here referring to both space, while environment in this planet Earth, as well as space meaning *outer space*, existence in other planets and dimensions – Fukuhara proposes the creation of a new body through the search for new postures that emerge in the process of diving deeply into the memory of the body. It is an approach to a body that relates to space, molding it and, at the same time, being shaped by it. It is also a thorough research of the human and its nature, precisely through the path of *non-human* forms, which according to Fukuhara may be forgotten in our body-mind⁶⁸. Ghosts, angels, extraterrestrial beings, animals, are frequent features in his workshops as a way to awaken the imagination of those who move. Imagination and memory function as factors of creativity and, thus, form a way to make of past experiences present creations. For example, participants are asked to dance and sing a song of their childhood while moving. Other strategies used by Fukuhara are to move while crying or move while laughing aloud. Fantastic stories mix with the guidelines and technical descriptions of a certain body-mind activity to be developed. Other times, they are told *en passant*, as an introductory teaser to the main part of his workshops, which Fukuhara calls «walking dance»⁶⁹.

In the walking dance, Fukuhara directs the participants with the simple directive of crossing the space while performing their own, authentic, walks. He calls attention to the fact that establishing an attentive and rooted connection between feet and ground is very important, process which he names «foundation» in his sessions⁷⁰. No further explanations are given. The authenticity of the walks would arise exactly from the concomitant construction of *emotional/imaginary landscapes*⁷¹ within this context. So, in Fukuhara, what makes of the «walking» a dance is its imagination/memory «foundation».

The imagination of life forms outside of the planet Earth and its creative function is very clear in

65. *Ibidem*.

66. *Ibidem*.

67. Christine Greiner, *Apresentação*, in Uno Kunichi, *Hijikata Tasumi: pensar um corpo esgotado (Hijikata Tatsumi: thinking the depleted body)*, translated by Christine Greiner and Ernesto Filho, n-1 edições, São Paulo 2018, pp. 19-28: pp. 19-20.

68. Cf. Tetsuro Fukuhara, *Vision of a body*, Pompka Foundation, Warsaw 2018, p. 45.

69. Tetsuro Fukuhara, *Space Dance*, workshop held in Duncan Dance Studio, Rome 2012. Oral source.

70. *Ibidem*.

71. In her workshop *Power of Imagination* (July 2020), Seki Minako tackled the theme of creating landscapes saying that by adding to a certain pattern of movement individual imaginary content one was actually creating «emotional landscapes». Oral source.



Fig. 9: Still of *Pele* (video-performance, November 2019).

the performance/installation/workshop *Space Dance in the Tube* of Fukuhara. The *tube* in Fukuhara's *Space Dance* is an approximately 10 meters long white cloth, which was developed by JAXA (Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency) to create an environment proper for training humans to deal with different gravity contexts⁷². According to Fukuhara⁷³, the *cocoon* shaped tube may also be a way of re-entering the universe of a stage of life previous to birth (a reference to the womb) when human-beings are already gathering memories and developing their emotional apparatus. By entering and moving in the *tube* these memories are brought back to life in the present moment and transformed into actual experiences. In *Pele*, the cover of the white dress summed to the fetal position of the body also provoked similar sensations.

In the *tube* of *Space Dance*, the human has to adapt to a form of sensation of gravity different from the one he deals with in daily life and, therefore, find a new point of balance to stand and move. Fukuhara asserts that one should try to find the «point located on the limit between balance and imbalance»⁷⁴, that is, that dance happens in a state of *quasi-fall*. Fukuhara inherited this vision from Kasai Akira (with whom he danced) who said that «compromising the state of balance is the most important dance technique»⁷⁵ and that «you have to put your body in danger to be able to move when

72. Tetsuro Fukuhara, oral source. *Space Dance*, workshop held in Duncan Dance Studio, Rome 2012.

73. *Ibidem*.

74. *Ibidem*.

75. Kasai Akira, during a butoh workshop in Rome 2006, in Maria Pia D'Orazi, *Il butō in Italia e l'esperienza di Kasai Akira*, cit., p. 144.



Fig. 10: Still of *Pele* (video-performance, November 2019).

you want move»⁷⁶. This borderline state of *quasi-fall* is what Simondon would call «metastability»⁷⁷. This is a state full of power and possibility, which differs from stable balance and rest. The stable balance excludes the possibility of transformation, the process of «becoming», because here «all possible transformations have already been carried out and there is no longer any strength»⁷⁸. Here, I make a bridge again with butoh's aesthetics and philosophy of *transformation*, with the tension or dynamics that one seeks to maintain between different sides, parts of the body, concepts... the *quasi*-stillness filled with power and the *quasi*-explosive frantic moves; the *quasi*-corpses that express the *quasi*-living beings. In *Pele*, this state of *metastability* is the ground upon which every gesture, every intention, every concept, including the *skin*, was built.

Conclusion: Inside and Beyond Performance and Choreography

«Hijikata searched for something that would transcend dance through dance»⁷⁹.

Based on the thinking of authors such as António Damásio, Gilbert Simondon, Judith Butler, Paolo Virno, among others⁸⁰, Greiner defends a phasic, discontinuous and decentralized notion of the

76. *Ibidem*.

77. Gilbert Simondon, *La individuación: a la luz de las nociones de forma y de información*, cit., p. 28.

78. *Ibidem*.

79. Uno Kunichi, *Hijikata Tatsumi: pensar um corpo esgotado*, cit., p. 74.

80. Cf. Judith Butler – Athena Athanasiou, *Dispossession: the performative in the political*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2013; António Damásio, *O mistério da Consciência, do corpo e das emoções ao conhecimento de si*, translated by Laura Teixeira Motta,

individual as metastable singularity more than an *a priori* identity⁸¹

Although the way of conceptualizing and generating terminologies is not the same for all of these authors, there is an unfinished instance that marks the reading of what constitutes “me” from bodies and environments. A kind of precariousness in life that does not necessarily tend to finitude but, above all, to collectivization⁸².

Judith Butler⁸³ approaches the construction of individuality in terms of a relational process, a «relationality» that is not composed solely by the *self* nor by the other («you» in Butler’s words) but that must be conceived as the «bond» whereby these terms are both differentiated and related. Although highlighting that it is not a question of delimiting a universal field for the human, Butler defends the existence of a «vulnerability common to the human» that stems from «life» itself; a «primary vulnerability» that «precedes the very formation of the self» and that derives from the «condition of having been born naked from the beginning and against which one cannot argue»⁸⁴. The body is defined as a «place of desire and physical vulnerability», as «a place of publicity that is both assertive and exposed»⁸⁵.

The idea of a sort of primary vulnerability as a common sphere of the living has been object of butoh’s research from its origins. Hijikata, as he «matured», focused his concerns on the «emaciated body»⁸⁶. This led him to pay less attention to the «gross motor skills of the body» than to the body «in a minute scale», which included fragmenting movement through the insertion of brief pauses, questioning how «mental imagery» could transform the body and also how this «emaciated body could evoke sympathy in the viewer»⁸⁷. Hijikata sought for a «body singularly open to the outside»: «infinitely open to everything, to the air and the wind, the lights and darkness, the respirations and looks, to insects and animals even to smell and mold»⁸⁸. In the training methods developed by the three contemporary butoh artists concerned in this article, such strategies for reaching such body in “a minute scale” as well as the construction of this state of openness or permeability are thoroughly contemplated and further developed according to their own biographic and artistic pathways.

Butoh’s “essence” hides in the continued establishment of new relationships through allowing the body to be “invaded” and, in this sense, it is an “unfinished project”: «Most of all, it demands that artists experience the pain of others and particularly those who have been hurt by the diffuse customs and

Companhia das Letras, São Paulo 2000; Gilbert Simondon, *L’individuation psychique et collective*, Aubier, Paris 1989; Paolo Virno, *Gramática das Multidões, para uma análise das formas de vida contemporâneas*, translated by Leonardo Palma, Anablume, São Paulo 2015.

81. Cf. Christine Greiner, *Em busca de uma metodologia para analisar a alteridade na Arte (Searching for a methodology to analyze alterity in Art)*, in «Conceição/Concept», vol. VI, n. 2, July/December 2017, pp. 54-64: p. 60.

82. *Ivi*, p. 58.

83. Cf. Judith Butler, *Precairous Life*, Verso, London/New York 2004, pp. 128-152.

84. *Ivi*, p. 31.

85. *Ivi*, p. 20.

86. Cf. Bruce Baird, *Hijikata Tatsumi and Butoh: Dancing in a Pool of Grey Grits*, cit., pp. 207-218.

87. *Ivi*, p. 214.

88. Uno Kunichi, *Hijikata Tatsumi: pensar um corpo esgotado*, cit., p. 72.

conventions of society»⁸⁹. Pain is something present, actual. One cannot remember pain nor represent it exactly as it materializes in the body. Pain is an experience. It can, however, be deconstructed from its immediate expression and, through perceptual assessment of corporeal sensations, feelings and images kept in the memory of the body, it might be reconstructed with different tools.

In this sense butoh, beyond an artistic practice that materializes in the form of performance and dance might be applied as a way of deconstructing and reconstructing ways of behaving and acting in other areas, and in a broader sense, within life in society. In the field of Japanese martial arts⁹⁰, Kanō Jigorō (founder of judō) worked within the field of what he named «mutual influences»: mutual influences both in what regards to body and mind, movement and thought but also in what regards to individual and social practices. «Acting on the body has an influence on thought, on self-awareness, on each person's way of being, with himself and with others»⁹¹. By *unshaping* the body-mind one is actually breaking the patterns of the society one lives in. Beyond choreography and performance, butoh might be seen as «a radical research about the connections among body-mind-environment, states of life and states of death, different levels of consciousness, and a challenge to question beliefs and habits (of both movements and thoughts)»⁹².

Hijikata's «project», of which the dance «was just a part»⁹³, succeeded in that it provided a tool for accessing a primary layer of vulnerability common to the living: a stance prior to individuation which may be a «depleted body»⁹⁴, a «cracked body»⁹⁵, an «emaciated body»⁹⁶, in Hijikata's own definition, a «corpse that puts itself up, risking its own life»⁹⁷. Here the risk the butoh artists take in going through this process of erasing the *self* from the *self* in order to understand the genesis of the *self* itself becomes clear. A corpse gives up its actual state, which is death, *non-movement* and *non-transformation*, in order to «put himself up», that is, to set itself in movement, consequently *in relation to*, entering thus a state of life. Butoh's way always involves *giving up* and confronting *otherness*, even and mainly when this means *depleting*, *cracking* (in the sense of losing one's identity) or *emaciating* oneself. And despite all its references to dead, weak or diseased bodies, it actually deals constantly with life itself (again confronting

89. Bruce Baird, *Hijikata Tatsumi and Butoh: Dancing in a Pool of Grey Grits*, cit., p. 218.

90. Here I do not mean butoh is a martial art nor that it is based on the practice of judō but that butoh belongs to a universe of body-mind training that evolved in Japan, upon a ground already populated by diverse body-mind traditions that meet each other in their originating principles.

91. Yves Cadot, *Kata, société et individu dans le jūdō de Kanō Jigorō*, in Emmanuel Lorezand (sous la direction de), *Drôles d'individus: de la singularité individuelle dans le Reste-du-monde*, Klincksieck, Paris 2014, pp. 225-241: p. 228.

92. Christine Greiner, *From the Cracked body to the wild flower*, published within the symposium *Nijinski à Minuit*, in *Transit* session, online: <https://ko-murobushi.com/midnight/en/> (accessed 9/9/2020).

93. Uno Kunichi, *Hijikata Tatsumi: pensar um corpo esgotado*, cit., p. 72.

94. Cf. Uno Kunichi, *Hijikata Tatsumi: pensar um corpo esgotado*, cit.

95. Christine Greiner has adopted the term «cracked body» from one of the pages of the diaries of Muruboshi Kō where the artist wrote: «the cracked body... the body open to the concept of having no identity». Christine Greiner, *From the Cracked body to the wild flower*, cit.

96. Cf. Bruce Baird, *Hijikata Tatsumi and Butoh: Dancing in a Pool of Grey Grits*, cit., pp. 207-218.

97. Uno Kunichi, *Hijikata Tatsumi: pensar um corpo esgotado*, cit., p. 73.

apparently opposing elements).

From this *naked* starting point butoh provides, perception, imagination and emotions play their role in mediating a dynamic web of relations with the environment which constitutes the so called *self*: an ongoing process of transformation, which in performance might be what Seki calls one's «very special» dance. Under the broader lens of life, it counts for the constitution of individualities inside a whole made of inter-relating particles, which like water change their state according to the level of agitation and inter-relation among them. A *metastable* whole.