

Maria Pia D'Orazi

BUILDING THE DANCING BODY.  
AKIRA KASAI, FROM BUTOH TO EURHYTHMY

At its very beginning in the early Sixties, Japanese butoh dance originated from a series of perceptive experiments that start by throwing out all techniques to ask an afore-question: «What is a dancing body<sup>1</sup>»?

It is the period of *Dance experience* series, when the butoh founder Tatsumi Hijikata was collaborating with the modern dancer Kazuo Ohno and his young pupil Akira Kasai; at the same time gathering around his research a whole generation of artists coming from different kind of artistic expression<sup>2</sup>.

The first result of that experimental work is the identification of a bodily level of perception that no longer pertains to the individual with a specific social identity, as much as to the *human body* as matter, a living entity just like any other element in the universe. The precondition concept of this work is the idea that body has a deeply mysterious essence that movement cannot avoid to be related with. Hijikata found a clue in violence and eroticism to glance this area. He discovered thus a dance that is already present within the body and that emerges as the dancer forget all techniques and dissolve Ego: «Rather than a weak body, happy to be subdued by reason and emotion, Hijikata asks of his own body that reason be made visible, and emotion a consequence of a physical act»<sup>3</sup>. Dance becomes the exposure of the body as matter,

<sup>1</sup> Actually the official beginning of butoh is considered the 5 minutes piece named *Kinjiki* (Forbidden colors) that Tatsumi Hijikata have based on the same novel by Yukio Mishima, and presented on May 24th 1959 at the New talents program of the All Japan Modern Dance Association.

<sup>2</sup> Among them: the writer Yukio Mishima, the painter Natsuyuki Nakanishi, the French literature scholar Tatsuhiko Shibusawa, the photographer Eikoh Hosoe and the graphic artist Tadanori Yokoo just to quote a few.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Maria Pia D'Orazi, *Il corpo eretico*, Padova, CasadeiLibri, 2008, p. 58.

emptied of any expressive urge of its own and presenting itself both as a storage space for the physical memory of its own acts, and a memory of the whole universe, perceived in its infinite spectrum of different energy vibrations.

Following this idea to the bitter end, Hijikata come back to his origin and reached an invisible space where lived-out gestures and observed behaviours deposit in the depths of the body, pushing out towards the light again, through the dance.

Trying to get to know the substance that made up his body, born from the experience of a young boy growing up experimenting the world in the harsh, powerful and uncontrollable wilderness, Hijikata ended up transforming Tōhoku – his native region – in an imaginary place, beyond time and space. Tōhoku in everywhere since «the utter darkness exist throughout the world»<sup>4</sup> he stated. The desire and the need to face the mystery of the body then could be the birthplace of butoh everywhere.

The *Tōhoku kabuki series* that Hijikata realized in the Seventies is a turning point of his artistic production and the formalization of his personal style. A similar changing occurred even in the artistic way of Kazuo Ohno and Akira Kasai. Ohno stopped dancing around 1967 and when he come back again on stage with *Admiring La Argentina* (1977), he has accomplished his own original butoh style. As Kasai he started a solo career in 1966, stops dancing in his turn in 1979 to go to Germany for studying Rudolf Steiner eurhythmy, and start again dancing in 1994 introducing a personal butoh style that has metabolized eurhythmy in his construction as well as the two models of his early training, that is the same Ohno and Hijikata.

If it is true that butoh can be built anywhere it is also true that «building butoh is a task that is simple and complicated at once: butoh is a dance that is born when you understand the body», Kasai observes, «but the understanding of the human body implies the understanding of the universe in its entirety»<sup>5</sup>. It is a simple question that needs to find an answer: «Can we read our body as though it were a book»<sup>6</sup>?

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Nanako Kurihara, *Hijikata Tatsumi. The Words of Butoh*, «The Drama Review», vol. 44, n. 1, Spring 2000, p. 21.

<sup>5</sup> Akira Kasai quotation from workshop in Rome on 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Akira Kasai quotation from workshop in Rome on 2004, also mentioned in

Hijikata compared the body to «a wall built with little bricks of time and space», as its present form «is the result of a desperate attempt to keep together parts of us that are dying one after the other<sup>7</sup>». The first concern of a dancer should be the awareness of the material that his or her body is made of, the total body sculpted by life in the course of existence. This is how he brought the revolution to the idea of dance, freeing it from the identification with movement and changing its reference points. The relationship with time and space changes: time is no longer a succession of moments to be filled by a rhythmic sequence of gestures, it is now the whole of the experiences lived since the beginning of time; the space isn't a place we can walk about or around, it is the surface occupied by the individual joined to the environment that he or she creates by changing the quality of his or her presence. Above all, «dance cannot be made of time and space alone»<sup>8</sup>. To reach the memory of matter it is necessary to develop an internal perception of the body, and directing awareness to the interior of the body means to recognize the identity of matter as energy. So that energy – as a category of time and space ruled by consciousness – becomes one part of the training. Feeling movement from within is an act that has to do with the relation between consciousness and matter set by imagination.

At the beginning of the Seventies, when Hijikata is working exclusively as a choreographer, his work with dancers becomes a method

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Maria Pia D'Orazi, *Il demone di Mezzogiorno. A proposito di Trasform'azioni e del Butō*, in Samantha Marenzi (edited by), *Trasform'azioni, rassegna internazionale di danza butō. Fotografia di un'esperienza*, Roma, Editoria&Spettacolo, 2010, pp. 38-39; and in Maria Pia D'Orazi, *Il Butō in Italia e l'esperienza di Akira Kasai*, in *Butō. Prospettive europee e sguardi dal Giappone*, edited by Matteo Casari and Elena Cervellati, Bologna, Dipartimento delle Arti, 2015, pp. 138-139, <<http://amsacta.unibo.it/4352/>>. The image of the body as a book is quite common in the language of Kasai. It appears even in Toshiro Kuwabara, *Dance closely related to matter. Kasai Akira Interview*, «Nikutaemo», n° 2, Summer, 1996, p. 34. And it is the leading motif of the book: Akira Kasai, *Karada to iu shomotsu* (A book named body), Tokyo, Shoshi Yamada, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Yukio Waguri, *Butō Kaden* (Butō Flower) CD-ROM, Tokushima, Just System, 1998.

<sup>8</sup> Quotation from Akira Kasai workshop in Rome on 2007, mentioned in Maria Pia D'Orazi, *Akira Kasai, il fantasma di Eliogabalo. Tre studi su Artaud*, «Biblioteca Teatrale», vol. 99-100, p. 86.

to build the dance through the spoken word. Hijikata ignites the dance using words with the aim of transforming the physical condition of the dancers. Yukio Waguri described it as a way to «physicalize images through words»<sup>9</sup>. As Nanako Kurihara tells it, «Hijikata had attempted to capture all kinds of emotions, landscapes, ideas, and so on, by using *words that were physically real to him*», with the aim to «make the dancers aware of their physiological perceptions», and «teaching them to transform their bodies into objects»<sup>10</sup>. The result of the constant repetition of these exercises is that «a butoh dancer can transform into anything at all»<sup>11</sup>.

Hijikata's verbal stimuli aim at making dancers aware of their body as a bundle of sensations. His suggestions are literally absurd: being trapped in pollen and disappear, become transparent, evaporate; flying like a stuffed bird that remembers having been alive; moving like a leopard with a spine made of light; feeling dead leaves falling inside the skull, a snail creeping on your neck, or a beard appearing in the atmosphere. Hijikata imagined his perfect dancer as a skeleton burning until it turns to coal. Indeed, burning until all muscles are consumed means eliminating all expressive urges. Only then is it possible to try becoming a reflection of the essence of the world. Letting the other come in and through our body: «The dancer becomes an object and the object calls a spirit, the dancer's spirit, which means that a human being turns into something that is no longer human»<sup>12</sup>. The body trains to overcome his limits and nullify the Ego:

An individual turned coal, absorbing and then radiating light, lets the particular shape of his skeleton appear. Reduced to coal, he can absorb light – that is he can incorporate all possible forms of life, everything that exists in nature, he can experiment different mechanisms of the senses and different qualities of energy – then he can radiate that light on stage, and make those forms visible by taking on their qualities along the boundaries of a particular body, that becomes itself visible as an outline, without any urge at all to show itself. Like a phosphorescent object that lights up in darkness, showing its shape as it goes from one

<sup>9</sup> Yukio Waguri, *Butō Kaden*, cit.

<sup>10</sup> Nanako Kurihara, *Hijikata Tatsumi. The Words of Butoh*, cit., pp. 15-16.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>12</sup> Tatsuhiko Shibusawa, *Hijikata Tatsumi. Plucking off the Darkness of the Flesh*, «The Drama Review», vol. 44, n. 1, Spring 2000, p. 53.

metamorphosis to the next, following the essential structure of the body that is made of bones<sup>13</sup>.

The individuality is nothing but «the overflow to outside<sup>14</sup>». This is how Hijikata created *his own* universe through *his own* language. He built *his own* imaginary world through his dancers' bodies. But this practice hide a danger and Hijikata himself seems to have been aware of it. He confessed that his dance has no teachers, apart from his father and himself as a boy, experimenting the world in the wilderness. Then, to Tatsuhiko Shibusawa who asks him how to teach butoh to young dancers who have lived different experiences, Hijikata answers that «everyone of course has a slightly different objective». Nonetheless, «everyone has a body»: «I hope to share the common elements with them<sup>15</sup>». The teaching system is nothing but an hope. In front of this small crack Kasai pose himself the theme of the “objectivity”.

On the one hand, «Hijikata constructed his dance piece so that memories in the body were provoked, but his stance was that only the audience could recall the memories. He didn't have his dancers recall memories in their body»<sup>16</sup>. On the other hand, «Ohno is one who wouldn't move a single step until he had formed a base of imagination. He is one who started with imagination and distilled it down to a few drops of essence, and then he could dance<sup>17</sup>». But his images are «extremely personal»<sup>18</sup>.

According to Kasai, the real revolution brought by Hijikata in the dance history consists in having identified dance with «the manifestation of the awareness existing in the body in the here and now»<sup>19</sup>. This means that building the dancing body you needn't train physical

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Maria Pia D'Orazi, *Il corpo eretico*, cit., pp. 61-62.

<sup>14</sup> Tatsuhiko Shibusawa, *Hijikata Tatsumi...*, cit., p. 54.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>16</sup> Toshiro Kuwabara, *Dance closely related to matter. Kasai Akira Interview*, cit., p. 35.

<sup>17</sup> Tatsuro Ishii, *Artist Interview. A look into the choreographic art of Akira Kasai, fifty years after entering the world of Butoh*, «PAJ Performing Arts Network Japan», 26 February 2013, p. 7.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>19</sup> Akira and Hisako Kasai, *Ima mata odori hajimemashō*, «Gendaishi Techo», n° 9, September, pp. 76-85.

strength through the building up of your muscles, as much as «modifying the body through the training of your awareness»<sup>20</sup>. And awareness is trained through the imagination.

Dance begins when body meets consciousness, and how that connection is established depends on the dancer's history and personality. That is why each dancer is different and teaches different things. Each teaches the path that leads to the personal identification of one's own dance.

If it is the imagination that transforms the body, then there's a risk that dancers, using their own personal images as they teach, will condition the form of the dance. To overcome this limit, Kasai tried to develop an "objective" system of imagination. And the meeting with Steiner's eurhythmy – that connects body and consciousness through the use of words – was a way to deepen the original research of butoh in the direction of a "metre" of imagination. That is a kind of "universal" imagination that anyone could refer to, and that would have the same function that rhythm has in poetry.

When he talks about dance, Kasai speaks of two different degrees of composition: «The work brought onstage, the visible dance, the choreography recorded in history, and something deeper such as the building of the body, the dancer's body in itself, the body as a work of art»<sup>21</sup>. These are two different ways of dancing, linked to one another, that can appear together or flow separately, one parallel to the other. As classic ballet, for example, «the piece comes out thorough the building of the body, since in this field you need to master the ballet techniques to dancing». On the contrary, «contemporary dance often starts from the idea of the piece itself, and create the performance through improvisational dance sessions»<sup>22</sup>. Well, if we consider butoh as a way of showing what human body is in its essence, we have to admit that its field is the building of the body as an artwork. But according to Kasai this is not the only purpose of butoh. Its fundamental feature is «dissolving the Ego» and, from this point of view, «showing the body *as it*

<sup>20</sup> Tatsuro Ishii, *Artist Interview...*, cit., p. 10.

<sup>21</sup> Akira Kasai quotation from workshop in Rome on October 2010, also mentioned in Maria Pia D'Orazi, *Il demone di mezzogiorno*, cit., p. 43; and in Maria Pia D'Orazi, *Il Butō in Italia e l'esperienza di Akira Kasai*, cit.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*.

is cannot be enough as a dance piece, even if into the whole butoh concept the body is already considered in its presence a dance piece, and there is no need to create a well done choreography»<sup>23</sup>. Then the point of butoh is not «what the dancer can create by means of the body» as much as «how the dancer relates to the body»<sup>24</sup>.

That is dance arise in the very moment in which imagination became tied to the body and let transform it. The relation between body and imagination lie at the core of butoh and it is one of the eurhythmy working principles. Kasai beliefs that body awareness becomes an external image by means of the senses changing. Or even when senses and consciousness work together then the physical body changes, as well as the same matter changes<sup>25</sup>.

Butoh tries to connect movement to the energy of the senses, and to the energy of words. According to Kasai this is a kind of esoteric construction of the body that already belongs to modern dance and begins with «feeling the movement from inside»: Rudolf von Laban, Mary Wigman and Isadora Duncan were all working in that direction. In those same years Rudolf Steiner developed a method to understand what the body is from inside, and he called this method eurhythmy, but Kasai maintains that it hasn't been used by dancers yet, because it grew in esoteric circles, bordering on occultism and therefore little known.

It is through the eurhythmy experience that Kasai became aware of «the power of words»: for example with the word sea, «the most fundamental power» of that word is not the meaning, but the fact that «word can create a sea [in one's mind]. That is the entire “external world” exists within the human body, and it is words that bring it to life [within us]»<sup>26</sup>.

Eurhythmy is a technique to build the body through the energy of words. It is a method to organize our body's energy through imagination moving from the spoken word, just like Hijikata's *butoh-fu* that Waguri listed and classified. In Steiner's case, though, the classify-

<sup>23</sup> Akira Kasai unpublished interview with Maria Pia D'Orazi on February 2010, mentioned in Maria Pia D'Orazi, *Il demone di mezzogiorno*, cit., p. 43; and in Maria Pia D'Orazi, *Il Butō in Italia e l'esperienza di Akira Kasai*, cit.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Sondra Horton Fraleigh, *Interview with Akira Kasai*, cit., p. 233.

<sup>26</sup> Tatsuro Ishii, *Artist Interview...*, cit., p. 9.

ing of images hiding behind vowels and consonants follows a precise pattern of correspondence between man and universe that has to do with parts of the body, internal organs, blood, nerves, stars, planets, elements, metals, colors. An idea belonging to the origin of mankind, when sacred dances in the temples re-established the connection between man and the universe.

Butoh was born of the strong connection with the «national body», affirming the value of Japanese identity in times when the concept of Nation was stronger than today, before globalization fragmented it. It is thanks to the perception of this body that Kasai was drawn to eurhythmy, because «the national body is strongly influenced by the consonants and vowels of our native language» and «each nation has a different body and becomes aware of it in a different way». To be exact, «the body is built by means of sound»<sup>27</sup>.

This also means that each country has its own eurhythmy. And if, in his beginnings, Kasai studied German eurhythmy, he has been shifting his work in the last twenty years to adapt Steiner's work to Japanese language and imagination. He no longer refers to his work as eurhythmy, and now calls it Ephesus' technique.

Kasai's personalization of eurhythmy has been filtered by Japanese mythology and the *kotodama* theory. In particular, Kasai referred to the reading of *Kojiki* from a *kotodama* point of view rendered by Masumi Oishigori (1832-1913), a Japanese classical literature scholar who lived in Steiner's time.

*Kotodama* is a Shintoist meditation technique that means *the soul of words*; it is the *theory of sacred sounds* that states that sounds and words have their own power and their own spirit; *kotodama* is also a vibration in itself, the resonance preceding thought, leading to the shaping of letters and sounds, and therefore deeply connected to the creation of Japanese language. According to Morihei Ueshiba, the founder of the Aikido discipline – that he himself described as «the expression of *kotodama*» – *kotodama* is the Japanese equivalent of the biblical concept of Logos, the original force of Creation determining each and every manifestation in the universe. It is the energy creating forms.

*Kojiki* is the book telling the creational myth of Japan, and the

<sup>27</sup> Akira Kasai quotation from workshop in Rome on July 2014.



birth of myriads of gods. At first glance, it is a narration of events. According to some scholars though, Masumi Oishigori among them, there is a secret and a hidden rule behind the sound of each sentence. Trying to bring to light the secret history of *Kojiki*, Masumi Oishigori re-wrote the text looking at the combination of vowels and consonants. The meaning of the story is lost, but the energy of language is retrieved.

Originally, *Kojiki* belonged to oral tradition. Each name corresponded to a god and each divinity had responsibility over a specific sound. From the moment it was written (around the 8th Century) it began losing the energy of sound while the tale of events was brought to prominence. Masumi Oishigori wanted to bring the text back to the time when it only spoke of gods, and sounds still held the power of creation. Trying to show the creative force of Japanese language, he found a concrete image for every form of sound. Our body is part of the elements and contains the elements within itself. Movement corresponds to vowels and consonants, and refers to the energy of the images associated with each sound. The imagery behind each letter changes the quality of the movement's energy.

Each vowel, each consonant, creates a different kind of space. Each one represents a different kind of energy. Vowels are connected to the energy of language; consonants to the energy of conscience, and they always originated from the combination of two different directions: sky and earth, conscience in space and conscience in the body<sup>28</sup>.

As in Steiner's theory, we still have here the grid of correspondence between micro- and macrocosm, but the classification of vowels and consonants changes in relation to the experience of the Japanese language. From the point of view of the research on the relation between body and language Kasai's work can be considered as a deeper approach to the fundamental question of butoh over the meaning of the body and its evolution.

But I believe that the significance of Kasai's work lies far beyond, deepening our understanding of butoh as a contemporary form of art, in line with present-day considerations.

Butoh's strength has often been identified with the metamorphic

<sup>28</sup> Akira Kasai quotation from workshop in Rome on July 2014.

possibilities of the body, or with refined and pleasing aesthetics, whether it represents beauty, or deformity, or the grotesque. The result is that butoh today has become just another category of dance, losing the revolutionary potential it had in its beginnings in the Sixties.

The English director Peter Brook, when reflecting on the artistic legacy of Jerzy Grotowski, wrote that «if theatre is a living thing, imitation narrows the flow of life and brings to a paralysis. It is the paradox of form, unavoidable on one hand and so often corpse of the living impulse on the other». Then the point is «how can we receive the past as a living flow, without drying it all out»<sup>29</sup> and a possibly answer is that «the deep significance of the original idea must always be present, alongside our research for the technique»<sup>30</sup>.

The lesson of the past represents a degree of quality that we should always be aiming for. Understanding why Hijikata, in his own time, worked in a certain way, «opens a door, once and for all». It is a seed that can grow new visions rather than a definite shape, that would soon empty itself if the relation to the present, that was potent when butoh was born, were to be lost.

Through the “objectification of the world” Hijikata completed his “interior landscape”, and entered a dialogue with his present day. But, dancing butoh means not only reaching for a degree of metamorphic ability.

To speak of butoh, according to Kasai, three conditions need to occur, given which even a ballet dancer can be part of butoh: «A dancer should have the instruments to perceive his own body, because butoh is the awareness of the material existence of our body. He must live his present day, because butoh moves on with the world, it isn't a new tradition, it is always evolving. And his dance should be criminal, for butoh is always fighting power»<sup>31</sup>.

If you ask Kasai what can be the significance of butoh in our time, Kasai reminds that «at its birth, butoh conflicted with the powers-that-be by affirming Japanese identity. But today, in a globalized context,

<sup>29</sup> Peter Brook, *Insieme a Grotowski*, Palermo, Edizioni rueBallu, 2011, p. 100.

<sup>30</sup> Idem, p. 101.

<sup>31</sup> Akira Kasai quotation from a lecture at Japanese Cultural Institute in Rome on June 2008, also mentioned in Maria Pia D'Orazi, *Il demone di mezzogiorno*, cit., p. 44; and in Maria Pia D'Orazi, *Il Butō in Italia e l'esperienza di Akira Kasai*, cit.

butoh acts within the system». That is the “enemy” is no longer the State, it is the super-national power of computers and information technology. So that one of our tasks for the future is «to find a way to preserve the essential energy of dance, alive in a globalized world. It is completely different from the context that butoh has confronted in the past<sup>32</sup>».

According to Kasai the idea that globalization and computers have made worldwide communication easier is common place today, but, in truth, it is only «a superficial kind of communication, that has lost all intimacy, and has deeply conditioned our politics»: «Politics in a global era is appearance with no content, a sheer lie with no ethics<sup>33</sup>». Kasai believes that the only real war we face is the one between politics and culture, because «art can still create true relationships based on feelings, and sooner or later culture will begin to protest against the heartlessness of politics»<sup>34</sup>.

In this era of falsehood, dance is no longer for dancers only, it is for «every body». It addresses the need for a regeneration of a body that has been completely degraded: «My work is to create a new body, through the power of the word»<sup>35</sup>. This is how Kasai speaks today. That is, dancers should no longer train to «build a dancing body that is functional to the performance». Rather, they should train to «go back to the *origin of the body taking form*»<sup>36</sup>. The precise point where, in mythical times, word and movement are one. His aim is to regenerate the body through a renewed link between body and words.

The word born of the voice is warmth, and telling stories isn't just a way to «communicate meanings» but also a way to let out «a flow of forces directed at who's listening»<sup>37</sup>. This flow of forces is the energy keeping humanity alive, and at the same time a source that writing – tying words to meanings and turning them into signs – has dried out.

<sup>32</sup> Akira Kasai unpublished interview with Maria Pia D'Orazi in Tokyo on August 2010.

<sup>33</sup> Akira Kasai unpublished interview with Maria Pia D'Orazi in Tuscania on July 2011.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>35</sup> Akira Kasai quotation from workshop in Rome on May 2014.

<sup>36</sup> Akira Kasai, *Karada to iu shomotsu*, cit.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*.

Going back to the origin of the body then means that we can re-establish a link with the cosmic energy, feeling at one with the universe and going back to the primeval creating force. Kasai sees two possible methods to retrieve that origin: the first is vocalization – «the verbal action preceding the written word»<sup>38</sup> – and the second is the awareness of our perception through our senses. The result is a system of education and corporal development that overstep the boundaries of dance. Since it is through focusing one's perception on the physical sensations that a human body can be made aware of his deeper identity: it is then, when the intellect is silently directing conscience towards the senses, that we can perceive an *interior body* as energy flowing through the organism, experimenting contact with his essential identity through form. At the end of the path, the work that each dancer is doing on him or herself is like a journey toward the acknowledgement of the deepest Self. And it isn't only for dancers.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem.*