

## **Perception in Butoh Dance**

**Toshiharu Kasai<sup>\*</sup> and Kate Parsons<sup>\*\*</sup>**

### **Abstract**

In this paper the authors aim to clarify the meaning and role of perception in Butoh dance. First the terms 'perception' and 'expression' are contrasted, and the authors suggest that the dancer who 'perceives' the mind-body rather than 'expresses' the mind-body is engaged in dance that is more authentically Butoh. Next the use of the eyes in particular is explained, along with an analysis of Butoh's unique stance on excessive use of visual perception. Subsequently the authors explore in more detail what it means to perceive the mind-body and to allow passive perception to incite Butoh movement. The meaning of moving from 'social time' to 'body time' is described here, especially as it takes place in the Butoh Dance Method systematized by Kasai and Takeuchi. Finally, it is suggested that the implications of Butoh dance and training go well beyond that of the dance world, promoting greater bodily awareness not only for individuals, but for social groups whose movements are restricted by the norms of their cultures as well.

### **I. Introduction**

Butoh, a dance form developed by Tatsumi Hijikata in the late 1950s of Japan, urges exploration of the unconscious mind, of suppressed urges, of constrained impulses. The 'look' of Butoh - its typical white makeup, its distorted facial expressions, its jerking, twisting movements - is recognized internationally, but incommensurate awareness exists regarding Butoh's philosophical import and the psychological transformations that can occur from Butoh training. By focusing their discussion on the role of perception, the authors hope to elucidate Butoh's unique understanding of the mind-body relationship, and to give an introduction to the potential transformative and therapeutic effects of Butoh training.

In a recent paper, Kasai & Takeuchi <sup>(1)</sup> claim

"Butoh pays great attention to the least attended aspects of the mind-body. Tremors, tics, jerks, facial or bodily distortions, falling down, or any other involuntary movements are appreciated as ways to liberate the mind-body. They are used as keys to examine the unconscious mind by experiencing the very reactions or movements that are often prohibited or suppressed under the social norm of movements in each culture." The pages that follow constitute an attempt to explain how perception in Butoh facilitates this process.

### **II. Expression and Perception**

To begin, it will be helpful to contrast 'perception' with the concept of 'expression'. Although Butoh aims to discover, explore, and liberate aspects of the mind-body that have been

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\* Department of Liberal Arts, Hokkaido Institute of Technology, Sapporo, Japan

The author has moved to Sapporo Gakuin University, Faculty of Humanities, Department of Clinical Psychology, Sapporo, Japan, since April 1st of 2004. Email: kasait@sgu.ac.jp

\*\* Department of Philosophy, Webster University, Saint Louis, U.S.A.

suppressed and restricted by social conditioning, it would be a mistake to interpret Butoh merely as a method for 'expressing' something prohibited or suppressed. Characterization of Butoh as 'expressionistic' underestimates the role that perception plays in discovering, exploring, and experiencing the mind-body.

There is considerable debate among Butoh dancers and scholars about the extent to which Butoh can be traced to German "Expressionism" <sup>(2,3)</sup> and about the extent to which it might appropriately be dubbed 'expressionistic'. Founder of Butoh dance, Tatsumi Hijikata, reportedly trained in the tradition of German Expressionism, as did Kazuo Ohno, before initiating the world of Butoh. This historical link, as well as the improvisational characteristics common to Expressionism and Butoh, inspires some dance historians to emphasize Butoh's 'expressionistic' elements.

Yet many Butoh dancers reject the claim that expression is at the heart of Butoh, claiming that the link is only chronological. In an interview for the "Ex it! '99" Butoh workshop in Germany, Yukio Waguri, leader of the Butoh dance group Kozen-Sha claimed, "It is said that Butoh is a sort of Expressionism Dance, but I disagree, if the expression means to show identity " <sup>(4)</sup>. Waguri notes that the notion of 'identity' or 'personality' came from 'outside' - by which he appears to mean Western countries like the United States - and is inappropriate for describing a Japanese conceptualization of personhood. In contrast with the Western (particularly United States American) emphasis on individual identity rather than group identity, Japanese conceptions of the self are more diffused and permeable. Thus, the notion that the dancer would aim to 'express' who or what s/he 'is' inside, seems to be an imposition of Western ideology onto Japanese Butoh. Later in the same interview Waguri says that Expressionism presupposes an internal/external split that is inappropriate for Butoh: "It is often said that 'You have inside, but it doesn't come out' or 'You have only outside but no inside' I think we have to change these ways of thinking, which split the things in

two."

Some dance scholars may disagree with Waguri's characterization of Expressionism, and the authors will abstain from taking a stand on this debate. What is more important for the purpose of paper, however, is to suggest that the concept 'express' is inappropriate for capturing the Japanese roots of Butoh. The term 'express' means that something is pushed outward, and in some cases that what is internal is forced toward the external. Butoh will involve confronting and then liberating aspects of the mind-body that have been suppressed or restricted, but to portray this as the purpose of Butoh negates the importance of simply perceiving the mind-body.

'Expressionistic' seems an appropriate classification for the process of releasing what one might perceive, yet in Butoh, releasing is only part of the process. Sondra Horton Fraleigh, who trained with Mary Wigman (credited as one of the originators of Expressionist dance in Germany) herself and then later with Kazuo Ohno (considered one of the originators of Butoh) writes: " at the Wigman School, we worked on instructions spontaneously, then showed them to the class in various states on their way from improvisation to choreography. They were expressively directed, more outwardly demonstrated and extroverted than in Ohno's class. With Ohno one turned an inner eye to the movement and oneself ." <sup>(5)</sup>

Fraleigh's description suggests that Expressionistic dance (at least in the experiences she had with Wigman) might conceptualize perception of the mind-body as a mere step in the revelatory process, as a tool for revealing externally what one experiences internally. But the Butoh dancer engages in a kind of watching and 'noticing' of the mind-body for a purpose that is not externally directed. The process of using this 'inner eye' will be explained in subsequent sections, but for the sake of contrasting it with dance that 'expresses', perhaps it will suffice to say that perception in Expressionism and in Butoh differ according to their directionality.

The Expressionistic dancer might perceive the mind-body for the sake of transforming what she sees to the world outside of her, thereby directing a

good deal of her attention to an external environment and concentrating on how to transform her internal experience into its visible manifestation. The Butoh dancer, in contrast, is not aiming to 'portray' his/her perceived mind-body, but simply to experience it and allow this to arouse motion.

### III. Visual Perception in Butoh

Perception is involved at many levels of the Butoh dance experience. To begin, we explore the sense that typically comes first to mind with the term 'perception': the eyes. In his "Notes on Butoh Dance,"<sup>(5)</sup> Kasai explains that Butoh dancers often roll their eyes back in their heads, so that only the whites of the eyes are exposed. Some dancers, he says, do this intentionally, for the sake of "expressing something unsocial, grotesque." But to do so intentionally betrays a shallow embodiment of Butoh.

To these dancers, the visual effect becomes the purpose of rolling back the eyes, and essentially the movement is executed to show or demonstrate something to the audience. Such intentional movement betrays an outwardly directed focus of the dancer.

The one who more deeply embodies Butoh is not focused on how s/he looks. Yet, perhaps ironically, s/he is the dancer that Kasai claims will be more 'persuasive' to the audience. An audience member who tries to discern the difference between the outwardly directed dancer and this more persuasive one will be at a loss when examining only the dancer's eyes. But watching the bodily movements in connection with the eyes will help illuminate the difference. The dancer who intentionally rolls the eyes back is focusing attention resources on this movement, and this will be detectable in the body. The well-trained expert in Butoh will be able to detect how and where the dancer's attention resources are distributed, simply by watching the body as a whole. Kasai notes that being the object of an expert's gaze, and the shock it inspired, is what compelled him to enter the world of Butoh. Having someone 'read his mind' simply by watching his body fascinated him. And although Parsons has had only

minimal experience in Butoh, her initial reaction was similar. Kasai and dance partner Takeuchi were able to discern aspects of what Parsons would call her more private 'personality', simply through her movements and the ways in which she was responsive and resistant to touch. Parsons found herself shocked at their keen ability to 'read' her in such a short time. She likens this now to the surprise a client might experience in counseling, upon discovering that the therapist seems to 'know' things the client barely knows about himself or herself.

Butoh dance avoids the use of mirrors in training. Kasai notes "When you are watching your body in a mirror while dancing, you are not dancing, but you are analyzing the visual stimuli and might be losing the precious/subtle sensations in your body"<sup>(5)</sup>. Just like the dancer who intentionally rolls back the eyes, the dancer who watches himself or herself in the mirror diverts attention from alternative resources s/he possess for perceiving the body. Alternative ways of perceiving the body will be explained in more detail in Section IV, but for now it will suffice to say that the use of mirrors creates an imbalance between an outwardly directed and inwardly directed focus. The mirror seduces the dancer's focus outside of him/her, leaving the ability to focus inwardly untapped. Watching one's body in the mirror relies on vision, the sense we tend to exercise most, thereby failing to exercise the dancer's ability to invoke the perceptual capabilities of other senses, such as the olfactory and auditory capabilities, and especially the tactile.

Joan Laage, a dancer and scholar from the United States who studied Butoh in Tokyo for several years, writes: "Ashikawa, Ohno, and Tanaka constantly remind their dancers that the eyes are non-seeing. Ashikawa guides dancers by using an image of the head being one large eye, or of many eyes covering the entire body. She waves a newspaper in front of the dancer's face blurring the field of vision and causing the eyes focus to soften." Laage claims that this "diffused or non-seeing focus allows the head and, in particular the face,

which in the West is so communicative, to be equal to the rest of the body" <sup>(2)</sup>.

In conversations between authors Kasai and Parsons in September of 2002, Kasai explained this Butoh phenomenon in terms of peripheral vision. In Butoh, he explained, dancers spend time developing their ability to see peripherally. The physical effect of using the peripheral vision is that the eyelids lower slightly, the eyes become relaxed, and the focus diffuses. The point of this is not to achieve a certain appearance, but to be able to perceive differently. Using peripheral vision, the dancer remains open to his or her surroundings, yet by diffusing the extent to which s/he is 'focusing' on the external world, s/he is better able to perceive the self, i.e. his/her own mind-body. The result is that the dancer achieves a more equal distribution between outer and inner perception.

Relying on the peripheral vision opens up a 'wider' world, Kasai claims. It also, in effect, cuts down on our tendency to rely excessively on visual stimuli. Kasai, born and raised in Japan, suggests that this tendency, to rely heavily on visual stimuli, is particularly strong in Western cultures. People from Western societies tend to use their eyes in a 'laser-like' manner, and the distinction between the Western more 'penetrating' gaze, versus the Japanese more 'diffused' gaze, affects the relationship between perceiver and perceived. In his "Notes on Butoh Dance" <sup>(5)</sup> he claims that the result of the Western gaze is an increased separation between perceiver and objects perceived. Isamu Osuga, ex-leader of the Butoh group Byakkosha, supports Kasai's opinion. Osuga claims:

"In the West, ruled by Christianity, a bird's eye view is common like the ascension of Jesus Christ, who viewed the world from a vertical standing position, while in the Orient of Buddhism, an insect's eye view is common, like the Reclining Buddha as he died surrounded by his disciples, a lot of animals, insects, and other creatures. The West, which views the world from outside, and the East, which is inside the world, have totally different

vectors of the world" <sup>(6)</sup>

These vantage points, Osuga claims, translate into the dance. Butoh dance, which is indigenously Japanese, invokes a perceptual pattern and tradition in which the perceiver is inextricably part of the world around him/her. Western people, who may learn to engage in Butoh dance but from whose culture Butoh does not emerge, tend to forge a separation between themselves and the objects they perceive.

Parsons, born and raised in the United States, agrees that the typical Western perceptual vantage point has tended to objectify. In the Western philosophical tradition, the ideal viewpoint or perspective comes from a 'God's-eye view'. The perceiver, by extension of this metaphor, is a disembodied one; a perceiver with a 'view from nowhere'.<sup>(7)</sup> Parsons is convinced that this has profound implications for the ways in which Western vs. Japanese people, and particularly dancers, tend to perceive themselves in relation to spaces and to gravity, for example. But she worries that invoking the penetrating gaze as evidence of the Western philosophical vantage point might overlook one aspect of this way of 'seeing'.

People from Western cultures tend to hold or maintain eye contact longer than most Japanese. For the typical Westerner, this might be done to establish trust, and to convey respect for the speaker; relatively brief eye contact may arouse mistrust, or fail to communicate proper respect. To the typical Japanese, however, a direct, extended gaze might convey disrespect, or invoke a challenge. Joan Laage, (an American scholar) writes: "The diffused or indirect focus used in Butoh is familiar to Japanese people who use it in everyday life. It is related to their dislike for direct confrontation, and underlies their manner of communication through both gesture and language."<sup>(2)</sup> While a Japanese person would understandably experience the direct gaze of a Westerner as objectifying, this may be a phenomenon distinguishable from the ways in which each culture 'sees' the relationship between perceiver and perceived. This does not negate the truth of the

philosophical and cultural differences noted above, but it suggests that physical movement patterns bear a complex relation to the conclusions we can draw about either of these. The authors suggest that there is a connection between each culture's physical gaze as related to the cultural/philosophical orientation, though perhaps not a clear cut equivalence.

Yet, undeniably the authors feel that the use of peripheral vision affects how one sees himself or herself in the surroundings. Kasai notes that peripheral vision does not have the penetrating function into the outside world like the fovea vision, and gives one a feeling or sense that s/he is in the surroundings, diffusing the separation between the dancer and the air or objects around him or her. If one becomes accustomed to employing the peripheral vision, one can acquire another ability: the ability to see void space. While we typically look at things by 'watching', there is also a way to see the space itself, the space that is left behind. This claim brings us to alternative forms of perception in Butoh.

#### **IV. Mind-Body Perception in Butoh**

Whatever the precise relationship between the physical gaze and the cultural/philosophical gaze, the authors feel that most of us have come to rely too heavily on visual perception as our primary mode for experiencing the world. The term 'perception' applies not merely to the visual, even when we use sight metaphorically. Butoh dancer Min Tanaka writes, "We live with our bodies, and perceive the world, by keeping the eyes of our bodies open."<sup>(8)</sup>

In ordinary social settings, what Kasai will call 'social time', a person's perceptive and attentive patterns will be strongly shaped by beliefs about what is appropriate, expected, etc., for that setting.

In 'social time', certain stimuli such as a slight itch or a light breeze might be perceived, but fail to come to one's conscious attention, or at least not occupy the attention for long. Stronger stimuli, such as a more irritating itch might occupy the attention more fully, but an impulse to indulge the irritation might still be suppressed out of a need to behave in an appropriate and socially acceptable manner.

Butoh dancers explore the impact that 'social time' has on our bodies. As we age, we learn what types of movements are acceptable, expected, even desirable, and we learn to suppress impulses, drives, and desires - especially those considered unacceptable, rude, or taboo. Exploring the confines of 'social time' and the bodily habits that emerge through socialization, Butoh dancers attempt to shift into what Kasai calls 'body time', through a process that will be explained more carefully in Section V. When the dancer transitions from 'social time' to the slower 'body time', s/he allows passive perception to direct movement, allowing stimuli to 'call' him or her in ways that most of us fail to hear and then respond to. The trifling itch or tic that we ignore in everyday social circumstances becomes a major cue for behavior modification for the Butoh dancer.

The Butoh dancer's movements are not ordinary ones: certain parts of the dancer's body may tremble, stiffen, or jerk with distortions or twists. All sorts of disorganized movements, both abrupt and gradual, can emerge. Bodily movements of this kind have been observed in Autogenic Training, in the process called 'autogenic release'. In this process, the body performs a kind of automatic compensation for movements or emotions that have been suppressed<sup>(9)</sup>.

Autogenic release is a passive experience. Every reaction in the person's body surprises the person because s/he does not expect it or predict it.

To rely primarily on passive perception during Butoh dancing tosses about one's existence; the mind-body moves into a state similar to that experienced in Autogenic release. What occurs is not predictable, and yet it is the perceiver's own body that accounts for the unpredictability. Kasai notes that although the word 'passivity' often has a negative connotation, here passivity is a positive openness and readiness for foreign stimuli to arise, either from outside or from within. Suppressed impulses or buried emotions are often released during Butoh dance or performance, and movements that are authentic to the dancer (ones which should have been experienced or released when they were instead suppressed) emerge. The allowance of this process might fascinate, surprise, even disturb the dancer, but

it can also lead the dancer toward a kind of psychosomatic 'unity' of mind and body.

## **V. Thawing the Conventional Mind-Body; Cultivating the Butoh Mind-Body**

In order to liberate suppressed movements, Toshiharu Kasai and Mika Takeuchi have created three phases of a Butoh Dance Method <sup>(1, 10)</sup>. The method consists of three phases: a Playful Movement phase, a Relaxation phase, and a phase of Confrontation. The phases are designed to bring about openness to both internal and external stimuli.

Play and relaxation prepare the perceiver to allow such stimuli to overcome or overwhelm what has otherwise developed into a stable and firm system of cognition-response-behavior. The experience of finding oneself surprised by one's own body can be deeply enriching, but also disturbing and unsettling.

The process can invoke a myriad of emotions; for this reason it is profoundly important, especially for the novice to Butoh, to proceed through the phases of play and relaxation prior to confrontation.

In Parsons' first experience with the Butoh Dance Method, these phases helped her, among other things, simply to laugh and let go of anxieties (thereby releasing muscle tension that inhibits deeper exploration). Engaging in play with others promotes this. The process of playing - doing things that adults might regard as silly, but that are perfectly normal parts of being a child - helps minimize the importance on how one should look or behave. Appearing or behaving 'properly' is often regarded as a marker of the move from childhood to adulthood; Butoh, which aims to confront the movements and impulses that are sometimes unhealthily suppressed in the process, allows play to invigorate and to invoke freedom in one's movements. To discover the movements and impulses we experience freely as a child was one of the aims of Butoh founder Tatsumi Hijikata. Fraleigh describes Hijikata as follows: "There was a conscious effort in his (Hijikata's) training to reconstruct a child's wisdom, a kind of innocence which children possess, which we have forgotten, especially in regard to their

bodies." <sup>(3,11)</sup>

The relaxation phase moves a person into a state in which s/he is helped to 'slow down'; breathing becomes slower and deeper, movement is sustained and minimized. As noted earlier, Kasai and partner Takeuchi describe this as a process of moving from 'social time' to 'body time'. It becomes easier, they claim, to perceive one's own body when one is relaxed. The more relaxed one is, the more the person can notice authentic impulses, explore their dissonance from a socially conditioned or programmed response, and release the developed urge to suppress the motion. The transition takes time, and moving into deep relaxation may also present distinct difficulties for those of different cultures. In comparing his international experiences with the Butoh Dance Method, Kasai notes that Western people typically have more trouble establishing trust and a bodily responsiveness to others, while Japanese people have more difficulty exploring the uniqueness of their own selves (mind-body) as distinct from those of others.

In a state of deep relaxation, parts of the body may seem to move autonomously. Kasai, for example, has experienced his right arm moving in curious ways and then twisting. In this process of body 'un-tying', jerks or other abrupt movements may begin to come as well. The distinction between 'social time' and 'body time' seems to suggest a distinction between 'self' (meaning here one's own mind and body) and the minds-bodies of others. The surface implication is that one cannot really start to perceive oneself until s/he minimizes the focus on others, or the reflection of the self in the eyes of others (this reflection may come from other actual people, or from the internalized social norms of the super-ego).

## **VI. The Implications of Self Perception in Butoh**

Butoh may have liberating effects on the mind-body at various levels. On a very basic level, Butoh promotes exploration of the impulses that we all (perhaps annoyingly, perhaps unwittingly) restrict: the need to scratch an inappropriately located

itch, the desire to sprawl out instead of sitting appropriately upright, or whatever one's particular culture may restrict or frown upon. On a deeper level, however, the psychosomatic exploration of Butoh exercises can have profoundly transformative effects; it allows people to "live their own naturally arising emotions such as anger, depression, sorrow, fear, joy, etc."<sup>(10)</sup> and can be highly therapeutic. Some results of this exploration are even more astounding: Takeuchi engaged with a client at a mental clinic who recovered the loss of her voice after experiencing the Relaxation phase of the method. The Butoh Dance Method has enormous untapped potential for transforming how people understand, feel about, and move their bodies.

Parsons has been struck recently by Butoh's liberatory potential not just in terms of the individual mind-body, but on the level of the shared experiences of social groups as well. In particular, she thinks it has important implications for changing the extent to which women of various cultures are increasingly influenced by Western media images, and by particular visual images of the body. For instance, in her Women's Studies courses, Parsons finds that students give conflicting testimony about the appearance and experiences of walking in high-heeled shoes. Most students recognize that their movement is restricted by such shoes (that their stride is shortened and that their balance must be readjusted), but they are typically surprised to learn that high heels are also potentially damaging (by forcing the chest forward and the back to arch, undue muscle tension is created in the calves, hips and lower back, resulting in lower back and knee problems over long-term use). After considerable discussion and reflection, most students come to see this as an injustice, as one more thread in a larger fabric of practices that restrict women. Yet those very same students will insist, "But I can't help it, I just feel better when I wear high heeled shoes."

This apparent incongruity may stem from an excessive reliance on visual images of what women's bodies are 'supposed' to look like (according to a certain Western image). When women claim that they 'feel' better walking in high heels, they seem to

have in mind a more public or social phenomenon, the 'feel' of projecting what has come to be recognized as a more 'confident' or 'sexy' appearance.

The students above admit they tend not to lounge in their own homes in high heels, for instance. So in cases where their attention to the social world is allowed to relax, the impulse to project the bodily stance created by high heels is diminished.

The confession that it 'feels' better to wear high heels constitutes one example of the ways in which relying excessively on visual imagery thwarts our ability to distinguish between what authentically feels better in our bodies from what purportedly looks better. The way the body 'feels' and how it 'looks' are almost indistinguishable, constituting a particularly disturbing instance of an excessive reliance on visual perception. To correct this, there are several intriguing applications of Butoh training. One is that exploration of bodily differences between 'social time' and 'body time' may help women learn (or re-learn) to experience their own bodies in a manner distinct from the social. They may develop the ability not just to perceive themselves in terms of their appearance, but to perceive themselves through the use of their other senses. And the implications go beyond the use of high heels; a whole range of body image obsessions and disorders may arise from an excessive influence of visual imagery. Butoh, in cultivating an alternative manner of perceiving the body, could provoke profound changes in this regard.

Incidentally, some women will claim they just like to 'feel taller' in high heel shoes. Parsons suspects this is only part of the story, since when she suggests they wear thick soles instead, this is not taken to be a viable alternative. But the irony here is that if such women really wanted to increase their height, Butoh might actually produce that result! Kasai notes that it has been experimentally confirmed that one's measured height actually increases half an inch or so after relaxation exercises.

When one learns to perceive the ways in which socially imposed stiffness creates tension, and then to relax the tension, this can result in a lengthening of the muscles.

## VII. Conclusion

The role and meaning of mind-body perception in Butoh is complex, and this paper only scratches the surface in attempting to articulate it. The authors find that it is especially difficult to describe and understand Butoh perception without a term that means 'mind and body as an integrated, mutually influencing unit'. For this reason Kasai and Parsons have used the term 'mind-body' to try to minimize the mind/body split that is well entrenched in the Western tradition, but they admit that this term still presents difficulties. The term 'perception' is problematic as well, not due to its dictionary definition, but due to the fact that it has become overwhelmingly associated with the eyes. To most Western people, perception connotes visual perception, and extending one's understanding of perception to include other senses and parts of the body requires some imagination and readjustment.

Despite these difficulties, however, the authors hope at least to argue that an attempt to understand perception in Butoh is well worth the effort. They suspect that mind-body perception in Butoh has enormous potential for changing the ways we experience ourselves (our minds and bodies), and that it can reveal types of knowledge about the self and culture that remain otherwise untapped. The profound effects of Butoh have been proven already on the individual level, and Butoh can potentially have transformative effects on a culture's normative understandings of the mind-body as well.

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be a pleasant experience. For Hijikata, this often meant exploring pain, fear and angst. For an insightful discussion of Hijikata's views on childhood and his own development, see Nanako Kurihara, "The Most Remote Thing in the Universe: Critical Analysis of Hijikata Tatsumi's Butoh Dance." Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1996.

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