WHAT CAN'T BE SEEN CAN BE SEEN: BUTOH POLITICS AND (BODY) PLAY

By Peter Eckersall

Asobi, a Japanese term that connotes play and amusement is rarely associated with the physical or cultural dynamics of *butoh*. Yet as performer Yumi Umiumare who danced with Maro Akaji's dark-soul (*ankoku*) *butoh* group *Dairakudakan* for ten years argues: "these days their work seems more like pop" (Umiumare 1999).

Bodies in performance are subject to the interplay of context and culture and for this reason what was once rare in art and distasteful to society can become commonplace and fashionable; To cite Jameson, a cultural turn of "postmodern mutations where the apocalyptic suddenly turns into the decorative (or at least diminishes abruptly into 'something you have around the home')'" (1991: xvii). If attempts to signify *butoh* have become playful (for example, a trend seen in the increasing emphasis on performing the sensibilities of cuteness [*kawaii*] in Japanese post-*butoh* dance) and bodies are the decorative agents of the ludic condition, have we in fact reached an endgame for *butoh*? Alternatively, might artists not intensify the qualities of play in performance, escalate and increase their velocity to reach a point at which they explode and divulge an anti-playful opposite? This is to engage in what Auslander observes as a "transition from transgressive to resistant political art" in the postmodern era (1997: 58), resistance that might be found in this instance in an intense accumulation of signs on and through the body and their reproduction *ad infinitum* to the point of absurdity. Except that there are apparent resistances to some bodies; resistance also in Asian bodies opening-up new spaces in contemporary Australia. Umiumare and her collaborations with Malay-Australian performer Tony Yap might be productively read in this way.

Umiumare's 1998 production of *Fleeting Moments* and her continuing work with Yap in *How do you even begin to understand* are the basis of the most sustained examples

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of *butoh* related body performance in Melbourne over the last few years. I say *butoh* related (and again reflecting a trend in Japan) because *butoh* has become a contested, in some respects orientalist and overused terminology, its genealogy and stability as a modality of body performance has been undermined especially with respect to radical and transgressive forms of experimentation. Nevertheless, the hyper-presence of *asobi* and the intensities of the ethno-cultural interplay in the collaborative efforts of these artists are grounds for an investigation into a radical cultural politics of body play. The strategic discourse for this is now clear: “As well as being the site of knowledge-power, the body is ... also a site of resistance, for it exerts a recalcitrance, and always entails the possibility of a counterstrategic reinscription” (Grosz 1990: 64, see also Gilbert 1998: 18). Thus I will suggest that disjuncture and partial resolutions are visible in Umiumare and Yap’s work; tensions between notions of interior and exterior forms of physical engagement, fractured histories and cultures and a technologicalisation of the body that seems to emerge from an East-West hybridity constitute a moment of extreme playfulness. This draws our attention to questions of culture and counterstrategic notions of identity within the postcolonial space of Australia and experiences of its/our continuing dislocation in the region.

Fleeting Moments,¹ Umiumare’s major choreographic work to date, and a continuing series of duo works under the umbrella title of *How do you even begin to understand* (first performed in 1997)² constitute the body of work to be considered here. Both works play with cultural temporality and displacement and there is an evident concern to contrast deeper notions of truth that might be uncovered by re-examining the past (historical narratives and in the sense of coming from somewhere) with the fleeting and superficial nature of contemporary existence.

Relevant here is how Marilyn Ivy has noted the tendency in Japanese culture to imagine and memorialise the past with her notion that such *Discourses of the Vanishing* (from the title of her book) “can only be tracked through the poetics of phantasm, through attentiveness to the politics of displacement, deferral, and originary repetition” (1995: 20). *Fleeting Moments* was inspired by 11th Century court poems written by two famous Japanese poets, Lady Sarashina and Izumi Shikibu. A third poem written by Gina Louis in 1998, like the earlier poems, is

concerned to capture and express the ‘transient nature of all things’. In Ivy’s terms not only Japan’s past, but the notion of Japan itself in this performance becomes like the poetics of phantasm. Japan is not only displaced by distance but also by the critique of modernity that forms the conceptual framework of this piece. Thus, Umiumare asks: “Am I lost in the rush of twentieth century modern life, here in Australia, far from Japan? All around me, moments, fleeting. Memory is not perfect, it can only bring back images” (Umiumare 1998).

The performance of *Fleeting Moments* began reflectively and slowly. It utilised the sensibilities of low controlled movements reminiscent of *Noh* performance, although a pervasive atmosphere of playful sensuality over-coded the more austere rigidity of classical Japanese forms. It enacted a world of pleasures where play between bodies took the form of contemplation and desire. The transliteration of the poems into movement and its sensibilities was oblique and not at all literal, rather the performance was a kind of focused meditation on loss punctured by moments of extreme physicality. One might note the tension between the textual poetic references to the inevitability of change and a melancholy longing for a vanishing and phantasmic past (unchanging) that was inscribed on the dancers bodies through languid movement and glorious *kimono* costumes. Midway, an escalating sense of crisis developed as formally sensuous bodies were colonised by images of the modern. Performers became constrained by contemporary Japanese fashion, their gestures overcome by ceaseless manic attempts to answer mobile phones. The action spilled into audience and what was formerly discrete and controlled became chaotic and frenetic. The piece concluded with a imaginary return to another place of contemplation; in the words of the poet Lady Sarashina, “I yearn for a tranquil moment, to be out upon the sea of harmony” (cited in Umiumare 1998).

The Heian court is typically remembered as an island-like society that saw the development of many ancient contemplative and playful arts (poetry, dance, music, incense appreciation, etc) while surrounded by a tumultuous world that was in reality engaged in constant warfare. There is a sense by which the first movements of the piece depict a nostalgic and idealised picture of court life, an unreal Japan beyond the threshold of social reality. At a second level, the conditions of play suggesting the

courtly life of ancient Japan were overrun by excessive coporealities; impressions of the modern dystopian opposite were imposed upon the bodies of performers. Their repetitious and manic actions accumulated to the point of explosion. Modern forms of *asobi* (fashion, gadgets, chattering mobile phone social existence, etc) were represented in gestural forms that quite literally tipped the body over the edge. Everything had become *asobi*, to the extent that the pleasurable possibilities for *asobi* were negated and the repetitions of playfulness possessed the performers bodies, turning into images of distress like a computer virus.

Other performances from Umiumare and Yap's *How do you even begin to understand* series are in marked contrast to the theatrical complexities of Umiumare's *Fleeting Moments*. Speaking about the conceptual approach of the former, Umiumare says:

At the extreme edge our work as performers and our performing bodies may be extoticised, orientalist and fetishised. *How do you even begin to understand* sought to undermine these depictions of Asianness and replace them with an exploration of coteremporary Asian-Australian and regional points of view. ... We discovered a common association with the philosophical principle of *Yin* and *Yang*, oppositional elements that are found in all manner of Asian experience and daily life. (Umiumare 1999)

In the *How do you even begin to understand* series the two artists collaborate, working in a kind of spontaneous counterpoint that seeks to embody the shifting sensibilities of a *yin-yang* formula. Performances are therefore simple in structure and tend to be focused solely on the performers bodies.

A former actor with the rigorous physical theatre group 'Institute for Research on the Art of the Actor' (IRAA)³ Tony Yap is a strong presence in the work (to the point the Umiumare has commented that she might momentarily disappear) and the central locus of this work is always Yap's high-energy Malay-trance dance. As I observe it, his body assumes the Malay-Indonesian dance form with such strength and concentration that it seems to explode—eyes popping, every tendon visibly pumped, even the act of standing motionless makes his body perspire profusely. There is an impression of something cybernetic about this performance, as if the hybridisation of

form and context have uncovered a form of body-technology. To my mind, the body's viscera seems to become visible, organs and mechanisms that usually reside passively inside the body are brought to the surface and their movements made visible. I imagine a Deleuzian body without skin, the musculature an architecture of titanium rods and pistons. Taken out of its notional 'traditional eastern' context and in contrast with Umiuare's physically expressive sense of ludic wonderment, the body's mechanics in this work seems to extract pain and make it visible. So destabilised is the performer from a modern self and so filled with the unknowable identity of a Malay trance master that the body seems to enact a crisis in identity representation. I am left neither watching a moment of play (the work is too cruel) nor am I able to see Yap's performance persona at ease with his search for a ritualised and performative Malay cultural essence.

Working within such heightened states of coporeality and exploring modalities of play, I want to suggest that both artists are motivated to ask questions about truth and the essence of being. Yap seeks to be fully exposed in his work, suggesting that the work is most successful when the work "becomes a way of life and there is nowhere to hide" (Yap 1999). His work with trance is motivated by a need to work in a way that connects with his Malay upbringing: "for along time I wanted to work on non-Asian performance, I now want to bring things back" (Yap 1999). Umiuare now sees Japan in relief and tries to twin the cultural contexts of Japan and Australia in her work.

Keeping in mind personal histories and artistic motivations, the fact that Asian-Australian bodies are rarely seen on the Australian stage and even more rarely in control of content situates these works within a rubric of postcolonial discourse. Yap's 'postcolonial' trance dance make a power-play within Australian identity politics. Like the mobile phone mania that inhabits the bodies of the dancers in the 'modern' section of *Fleeting Moments* there seems to be an accumulation of signs, gestures and behaviours that enter and invade the body, their rapidity and intensity becomes disturbing, and the autonomy or unity of the body is rendered precarious. Thus, where questions of power can be applied to notions of unified identity, these become intermingled with alternative histories and symbolic representations of the

performing body. In the context of Howard-Hanson ethno-nostalgic Anglophilia, and a cultural shift that has exposed racism and a continuing ambiguity about Australia's place in the region, the playful technologies of these bodies are perhaps above all about their Asianness and their countervailing sense of dis-ease with migratory location. They act as sites for cultural interaction and interrogation and while Umiumare and Yap are performers with divergent trajectories, in tandem they seek accommodations, harmony and balance. Perhaps their physicalised demonstration of *yin-yang* philosophy where the countervailing forces in the space become a question of mutual respect, diversity and reappraisal in performative terms can become a model for reconciliation and negotiation of difference.

The performances discussed here remain deeply concerned with past and otherness. As Ivy argues, modernity accommodates the past through displacement. Ideas of historical cultures that survive or are retrieved do so by drawing attention to what is lost. This constitutes a sensibility of 'vanishing'; a poetics of *fleeting moments* or trance moments. Denoting something to be original and authentic (the past) is also a sign of absence in the same way that the development of polymorphic experience of culture draws attention to the inevitable loss of rigid cultural binaries. This is also a form of strategic play with symbols and myths, histories and identities.

Such a poetics of displacement might perhaps rejuvenate *butoh* as an interesting and progressive site of performance, one that remains true to its historical moment but offers new directions for a corporeal politics of transgression. When all is *asobi*, then the only strategy is to work through this fact and emerge somewhere over the edge. The presence of noise and clamour is therefore exposed as covering over something else that cannot be heard. It can't be seen but it is sensed, our dis-ease is the source of *butoh*.

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Notes

¹ *Fleeting Moments* directed by Yumi Umiumare. Performed by Yumi Umiumare, Lynne Santos, Sarah Potter and Tony Yap. Set design by Chris Arnold. Lighting by Shane Grant. Music composed by Anne Norman, Liza Lim, Yuji Takahashi and performed by Satsuki Odamura, Rosanne Hunt, Deborah Kayser.

² Version one of *How could you even begin to understand* performed at Experimenta (Melbourne) 1997 and was produced in collaboration with Chinese artist Lim Tsay Chaun. Second and subsequent versions featuring Yap and Umiumare alone were performed at the Anti-static Festival (Sydney) 1999, and the Horsham Regional Art Gallery (1999). A concluding full-scale performance work that hopes to reemploy Lim and draw together the threads of each version is planned for 2000.

³ IRAA was established in Melbourne in 1987-8 by Renato Cuocolo and Cira La Gioia. Yap was a foundation member of the company and worked with them until 1995-6. IRAA was influenced by the ideas of Jerzy Grotowski and like Grotowski had an interest in Asian performance practices. Since leaving IRAA, Yap has moved almost completely into dance forms of performance. Besides working with Umiumare, he is a teacher, choreographer and performer who has experimented with the notion of trance-dance as an expression of cultural identity.

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