Butoh and Transcending the Identity of Sex. Towards a "tantric" interpretation of Sankai Juku's *Kagemi*

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1 *Kagemi* by the Japanese Butoh company Sankai Juku was originally created for and at the Théâtre de la Ville, Paris. The production is currently touring internationally. I saw it in London at the major dance venue, Sadlers Wells. The Theatre's Press Release describes the performance (10-14 June, 2003) as one which "explores the other world reflected by the mirror image" (Sadlers Wells, 2003). The noun "Kagemi" is thought by the company's Artistic Director Ushio Amagatsu to be the original Japanese word for mirror. In *Kagemi*'s seven scenes water, wind, dance, echo, dark, light, abundance and emptiness blend into a beguiling stage composition. The dance floor is an imaginary pool into which Amagatsu gazes at imaginary reflections. There are moments when the stance of the dancers suggests mirror images. Above the dancers as they negotiate the stage, is a bed of "floating" (in/on air) lotus plants. In the ultimate sequence of the work, the male dancers perform gestures of prayer and supplication followed by the lowering of the lotus flowers to engulf and "drown" them. Finally their hands emerge, like plants, through the jungle of lotuses, as if lotus stems and possibly flowers themselves. I will return to the central significance of this final image with regard to gender later on in this article. Phytomorphic representations of the divine also are rich in diverse examples and often enigmatic. Holy plants and plants considered to be divine are represented in connection with notions of god/goddess in human form.

2 A common feature of Butoh that involved the creation of highly personal dances, of a notion of relationship between the Body and the Universe. This was predicated by a harmonisation of male-female energies in both male and female performers. The focus of this article is a particular trans-cultural interpretation of this notion of harmonisation and notions of "female" and "feminine" with regard to Butoh, as exemplified by this particular production.

3 Sankai Juku is perhaps the most high profile company that have emerged from the Japanese dance form known as Butoh. Butoh was originally termed *Ankoku Butoh* - meaning the dance of utter darkness. The principal pioneers were Tatsumi Hijikata - who actually gave the form its name - and Kazuo Ohno. Hijikata believed that Butoh was not possible to comprehensively define because it was in a process of inherently re-defining itself. For Hijikata, the practice of Butoh was an ongoing process that could never be complete or attained. So what we have is in fact an emphasis on process, on journey, rather than on form.

4 If one cannot define Butoh one can certainly discern some features that to a greater and lesser degrees are manifest in works which may be termed Butoh. First of all in Butoh the body has been the site for exploration. The body that Hijikata looked for was a Japanese body and the bodies that became his muses were marginal bodies in Japanese society: prostitutes, beggars, invalids and those who shared with him the rural poverty of Tohoku, the region of the north-east of Japan from whence he came. Historically this region functioned as a supplier to the metropolis a purveyor of rice, horses for war, and women for brothels. Indeed Hijikata stated that one of his elder sisters- was sold into prostitution before the Second World War, to enable the family's survival.

5 Hijikata and Ohno rejected existing Japanese vocabularies of movement such as Noh and Kabuki, searching instead for influence by more primitive expression, inspired in part by shamanistic practice, and Japanese culturo-aesthetics relating to metaphysical space and nature. Historically Japanese shamans - *mikos* - have been and still are female.

6 Butoh, despite rejecting classical theatrical forms, represented a search for an authentic Japanese art form in the midst of the country's Westernisation, a process that accelerated after Japan's defeat in the Second World War. Butoh was conceived in the cauldron of Japan's rapid post-war economic expansion and modernisation that led to immense social and cultural upheavals. Hijikata not only rejected Noh and Kabuki but also eschewed Western traditions - as above classical ballet, a form which he believed was inappropriate to the Japanese body. Hijikata described the Japanese physique as having shorter and bandier legs, more appropriate to an emphasis on being grounded rather than on "flight." (This idea was echoed by the theatrical explorations of Tadashi Suzuki, beginning a generation later in the 1960s as part of what became known as the "little theatre movement." Little theatre was a reaction to the Western orientated Shingeki [trans. "new theatre"]: a form of theatre that emerged out of Japan's post-Meiji Restoration Westernisation in the late nineteenth century. Suzuki and others searched for a contemporary theatre in Japan that was both radical and "authentic." He, unlike the Butoh pioneers, more explicitly drew on classical Japanese theatre to create a new vocabulary of movement. Ironically this Suzuki "method" is now being exported around the world as contemporary theatre training for the actor [Suzuki 1986].)

7 A number of Western observers have emphasised that Butoh emerged in relation to and as part of a "post-Hiroshima angst." Journalistic reviews invariably begin with this kind of comment (see Manuelli 16). It is certainly true that Hiroshima has made and still has a deep impact on Japanese people. Many Japanese still maintain very strong feelings of injustice

about the dropping of the atom bombs. However the conception and emergence of Butoh is a more complex matter. It involves discussion of historic aesthetic paradigms that have influenced Japanese art. One must furthermore consider the history of Japan from the late nineteenth century where we observe a substantial adoption of European and American ideas as well as the aforementioned post-Second World War reaction to that Westernisation in certain quarters of Japanese society with a consequent new search for authentic Japanese approaches to all art forms and disciplines. To complicate matters specific to Butoh, Hijikata and Ohno were strongly influenced by the ideas of certain European artists such as Genet, Rimbaud, Artaud, and movements such as German Expressionism. Finally one must be aware of a wider social process where Japanese have taken ideas from other societies and cultures and evolved them and synthesised them into specific authentic Japanese forms.

8 Butoh then embodies a specifically Japanese aesthetic, challenging both Western and Japanese classical ideas of beauty and transcending traditional issues of gender in dance. In Kabuki theatre there exist the *onnagata*, men who impersonate women. In the Noh theatre, men also play women. However in neither is the specific aim to develop a harmonisation of the male and female principle. Furthermore such a notion, in combination with other Butoh elements, was perceived to be far more subversive in Japan than Kabuki, which had now become high art. Ironically Butoh in this respect mirrors the subversive aspects of the original Kabuki from the seventeenth century, originated by a priestess named Okuni.

9 In one interview Ushio Amagatsu expressed the idea that in his work he tries to transcend the identity of sex:

> There is a fish which is born male, experiences the degeneration of its male organs and ends life transformed into female. This displays the primordial formation of male/female as a whole… During its life, this fish experiences both male and female existences ... it contains the origin of Mankind, when the fish first appeared to inhabit the earth. (*Dagens Nyheter)*

10 Kazuo Ohno and Tatsumi Hijikata, the pioneers of Butoh - the performance form from which Sankai Juku's work originates - danced in female costumes, "not as female impersonators, but to release their feminine side." (Fraleigh 95). Sankai Juku invariably wear costumes that resemble women's dresses in each of their works. *Kagemi* is no exception. This combined with their shaven heads and bodies coated in white make-up, serves to neutralise gender and androgynise their presence on the stage.

11 According to Johannes Bergmark, "the confusion between the attributes of the two sexes is something that almost only Butoh, except for night-club dancers, have taken out from the taboos of the respectable society citizen" (1). Although Butoh has certainly attempted to

do this, the comment is somewhat misleading as historically there are other examples.

12 Japan, China and India are countries linked by the origination and dissemination of Buddhist practice. Buddhism directly or indirectly has had profound influences on these societies and cultures. In Japan there is the notion of *inyodo* or the way of interaction of male and female. This corresponds to a Chinese Taoist concept of *yin-yang*. In India the notion of male and female, although found in both Buddhism and Hinduism, is central to the way of Tantra, a practice or way of being that predates both Buddhism and Hinduism and yet permeates both these ontological systems in different ways.

13 Tantra is not essentially a religion, nor a way of thought: what exists in words and images serves primarily as a means to action. Tantra is rooted in a holistic body. Essentially each individual must find her or his own way. Tantra is and has been radically subversive of the orthodoxies of South Asian religions; and, more broadly, of South Asian societies and cultures. Here one begins to see a resonance with Butoh. Duality is a starting point of Tantra: a bipolarity in which the two sides are parts of a single whole. Here the duality is a tension between matter/energy and consciousness, between positive and negative poles. Janakananda Saraswati explains that this is symbolically expressed as the union of the *Shiva*, the masculine passive (experiencing) consciousness, with the *Shakti*, the feminine creative (acting) force (Saraswati 20). The *Shakti* or female principle is the body's primal energy or power, the primal mother or "goddess." In contrast to *yin-yang*, Tantra has the masculine energy as the passive and the female energy as the active.

14 Tantrikas (male and/or female followers of Tantra) aim through different methodologies to release and develop this female principle. Butoh artists have incorporated Yoga - which derives from Tantra - into their methodology. Amagatsu's choreography and aesthetic, together with his predecessors, Hijikata and Ohno, and other Butoh artists, appear to incorporate a "tantric" approach to the "female" in their work.

15 In the chapter "My Mother's Face," Sondra Fraleigh eloquently elucidates the personal, cross-cultural and perhaps universality of the "goddess:"

> When we transcend our particular existential experience of "mother," the larger feminine principle, also called the Goddess, can begin to teach us. From Tara in Tibet to Isis in Egypt, she has many names. The metaphysics of the Goddess… is symbolic of qualities associated with the mythic feminine, wherever it manifests in women and men. In principle, our higher experience of mother is not existential - fraught with fearful possessiveness, worry and guilt - but metaphysical: that is full of grace […] Kazuo Ohno […] emphasises a yin/yang perspective akin to that of Jung, teaching that each person contains the mother and the father, being born of both […] The earthy soft aesthetic of Butoh makes conscious use of the mythopoetic mother principle […] Butoh is an attempt to reclaim earthy, dark and often bucolic values as they are

quickly receding in industrialised post-war Japan and threatened around the world in the destruction of nature. (90-95)

16 Bullough and Bullough's study on cross-dressing further substantiates the cross-cultural and trans-historical nature of revealing the feminine. Referring to Hinduism they explain that a man was a man only because of the excess of the principle of masculinity, while a woman had an excess of femininity (Bullough and Bullough 7).

17 Bullough and Bullough further explain the subversive aspect of Tantra:

Tantric cults are antinomian… Hindu tantrics (sic) believe that the goddess Sakti, (also known as Shakti) is particularly gratified by prohibited and reprehensible acts that either ignore or transgress the established laws of society, morality and religion; a key teaching is that spiritual union with the god can be best attained through sexual union in the flesh. (8)

18 There is a correspondence with the origins of Butoh here. Tatsumi Hijikata's first work *Kinjiki* ("Forbidden Colours"), inspired by Mishima's work of the same name, was a highly subversive work in terms of both the Japanese dance world and of wider society. This work was according to Lizzie Slater "a violent spasm of antidance: a young man clutches a live chicken between his thighs, in the midst of a brutalising act of buggery" (Stein 107-125). *Kinjiki* caused a scandal: some walked out, others fainted, and in one fell swoop the Japanese Dance world was split. Butoh was violently born. It has been until recently, substantially ostracised by the Establishment and the mainstream and remained very much an underground movement in the 1960s and 1970s.

19 In the first paragraph, I mentioned the play of light and dark in *Kagemi*. Amagatsu states: "I don't think how to light the stage but how to create darkness" (*Independent* 25). Darkness and shadow, as Tanizaki elucidates (*Shadows*), have been significant features in Japanese art and culture. Initial meanings of *yin* and *yang*, derived from Chinese astronomy, was moon and sun; or the shady and sunny sides of a mountain. The concept of *yin-yang* came into being to represent cyclic patterns. Wang Ch'ung stated that "the *yang* having reached its climax retreats in favour of the *yin*; the *yin* having reached its climax retreats in favour of the *yang*" (Wang 7).This corresponds with the kinetic relationship of sun and moon with the earth. Chinese astronomers charted this movement and from this chart came the well-known sign of *yin-yang*.

20 The descent of the lotus plants in the penultimate sequence of Kagemi to "drown" the performers thus has a critical significance in terms of an understanding of Amagatsu's avowed concern with the male and female principle in his work, and its correspondence with Tantra that I have attempted to outline. More than one hundred species of lotus plants are found in

temperate zones in America, Europe, Africa and Asia. The lotus flower is an ubiquitous icon in South, South-east and East Asia. Moreover it is also prevalent in ancient Egyptian, Phoenician and Assyrian cultures. In addition to artistic uses, the lotus, since ancient times, has symbolized fertility and related ideas, including birth, purity, sexuality, rebirth of the dead, and, in astrology, the rising sun. In Homer's *Odyssey,* Odysseus lands on the island of the Lotus Eaters. Eating the lotus plant made his men forget everything and exist in bliss: perhaps an interpretation of re-birth, or of renewal, or of a kind of enlightenment. In Buddhism amongst other things it is used to symbolise both enlightenment, and the importance of the mundane realm of our daily lives. Enlightenment is to be found in commonplace. The lotus plant is found to grow most verdantly in murky, muddy swamps, its roots sunk in the detritus below it. In Japanese Buddhism there is the term *Bonno soku Bodai* that means "earthly desires equal enlightenment." The earthly desires are symbolised by the muddy swamp. The lotus flower emerging from the plant symbolises enlightenment. Tatsumi Hijikata seditiously wrote: "I am very aware that my Butoh originates somewhere totally different from the performing arts, related to Buddhism, Shinto, or whatever, I was born from the mud" (Hijikata 4).

21 The Lotus flower is also a significant female icon in Tantra. As Philip Rawson notes: "It (Tantra) uses many female icons, including lotus-flowers" (Rawson 16) in order to focus tantrikas' "attention on the female as the best meditation on the female as the most direct approach to the intuition of truth" (16). If there is anything universal about Amagatsu's work - as exemplified by this production - it certainly lies in the importance of an ongoing and profound investigation of the female principle. The sublime image at the end of this production, with white limbs of the dancers reaching out of a forest of giant lotus plants, superseding the image of a literal lotus flower, can be interpreted, if one deduces the lotus plant being the male and the lotus flower being the female principle, as a "transcended gendered" hand appearing, flower-like, through the forest of plants, epitomising the sublimation of male principle and the blossoming of the female. Furthermore Amagatsu's work could be interpreted as synthesising a number of concepts: the relationship between the human being and nature pertinent to a "post-humanist" society (subject for a further article); the disruption of conventional perceptions of gender; and the ongoing subversion of Butoh, even with itself.

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