

The "Feminine Principle" in Butoh: A Methodology that Spans History, Cultures, and Disciplines? or Developing a "Feminine" Body-Space on a Sunday?

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Abstract:

I am concerned with gendered body-space, and whether the aspiration for a notion such as 'feminine principle' is or can remain valuable in con-temporary-space. In an earlier article, a tantric interpretation of the dance work Kagemi, choreographed by Ushio Amagatsu, I introduced the notion of supposed inter-action between 'male and female,' known and defined in various ways in Japan as *in-yo-do*, in China as *yin-yang*, in Tibet as *yab-yum*. In South Asia the notion of male and female body-space, although found in Taoism, Buddhism and Hinduism, is central to the way of Tantra. Unlike notions of female body-space found in Japan, or China, in South Asia, in Tantra the notion of the 'feminine principle' considered the female aspect as active and the male aspect as passive. I am reflecting on whether the positing of ancient notions of the 'feminine principle' are effective in con-temporary-space; whether a significant re-conception of body-space is possible, and for whom; and if the pursuit of such an aspiration may need a jettisoning of the historic insights altogether.

1 This article is a further examination of a subject area investigated in my review "Butoh and Transcending the Identity of Sex" in *Gender Debat|t|ed*. I am concerned with gendered body-space, and whether the aspiration for a notion such as "feminine principle" is or can remain valuable in con-temporary-space. In the earlier article I introduced the notion of supposed inter-action between "male and female," known and defined in various ways in Japan as *in-yo-do*, in China as *yin-yang*, in Tibet as *yab-yum*. In India the notion of male and female body-space, although found in both Buddhism and Hinduism, is central to the way of Tantra, a practice or way of being that, according to some , predates both the conception of Buddhism and Hinduism and yet permeates both these ontological systems in different ways as well as Jainism. Although according to George Feuerstein, it made its appearance in 500 C.E., and its influence reached maturation circa 1000 C.E. (X). This I believe corresponds to an apogee of South Asian civilisation, embodied in the rock cut edifices at Ellora. The work and practice at Ellora aspired for an integrative dynamic of body-space-time- nature-art-ontology-technology-science. Unlike notions of female body-space found in Japan, or China, in India, in Tantra the notion of the "feminine principle" views the "female aspect" as active and the "male aspect" as passive. As previously stated:

If there is anything universal about Amagatsu's work, it certainly lies in the importance of an ongoing and profound investigation of the "feminine principle" [...] 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; the disruption of conventional perceptions of gender; and the

ongoing subversion of Butoh, even with itself. (ajaykumar online)

Beyond this extract, I do not intend to summarise or refer to the first article, as it is so readily accessible on this journal site. Some readers who are unfamiliar with Butoh and the subject area may find it useful to read that article as a precursor to this one. I am reflecting on whether the positing of ancient notions of the "feminine principle" are effective in contemporary-space; whether significant re-conception of body-space is possible, and for whom; and if the pursuit of such an aspiration may need a jettisoning of the historic insights all together. This theme extends beyond performance. In the case of Butoh, it could be argued that it is an art practice and an ontological process syncretical of "meditation" in its profound sense. In Tantra the artefact essentially exists only to enable that ontological process. It is of greater significance that in India the artist has historically been regarded as an adept in and that the act of artistic creation was pursued with all the dedication and single-mindedness of a spiritual practitioner. Indic Art was seen traditionally as a form of Yoga. A "tantric" reading of *Sankai Juku* could be provocative, in the context of Tantra being a philosophy or un-philosophy of the body. Scholars and teachers oft quote from the Vishva-Sara-Tantra: what is not here is nowhere.

2 In the terms of a body-space or a body-space-time, the statement by Kayo Mikami, a former acolyte of Hijikata, that "Butoh is now, always now" is ontologically significant. How is the now? How is the significance of Butoh in the now? How is the significance of the now in Butoh? Some argue that *Sankai Juku* is not Butoh. How is? A well known *Tao* saying is "the minute you name a thing you miss the mark." Pina Bausch is often quoted as saying "I am not interested in how the body moves but what moves the body." How moves the body-space?

3 *Sankai Juku* on the whole avoids "naming" its work in terms of explaining it. According to Pierre Barnier, *Sankai Juku's* producer, the publication of *dialogue with gravity* was in effect an act of appeasement to critics' requests for explanation. It is a slender and small volume of text, 14 cm x 10 cm, with two images only. It is significant, however, that the content of the much bigger, thicker and larger book, *Sankai Juku*, by Amagatsu and Delahaye, is primarily images with one essay only. One of the difficulties of wider comprehension of Tantra is its necessary secrecy. Although there are Tantric texts, it has been essentially a secret teaching passed from teacher to pupil when teacher felt pupil was ready to receive it. The first image in this book is one of Amagatsu in an androgynous costume. Further images of androgynous bodies follow, intensified by the fact that in each image the performers have shaven heads and white make up, which covers almost the entirety of their body. This body is

often shown almost naked, save the covering of genitalia. Sri Ramakrishna, a significant adept of the nineteenth century spent a period of time dressing and behaving as a female devotee. He wrote of his unusual practice:

I spent many days as the handmaid of God. I dressed myself in women's clothes, put on ornaments, and covered the upper part of my body with a scarf, just like a woman. With the scarf on I used to perform the evening worship before the image...I cannot speak of my self as a man. (Nikhilananda 603)

With regard once more to the book, *Sankai Juku*, the fact that such a relatively large tome consists primarily of images reminds me that the ancient Greek word for "thinking" was one that had a multi-sensory notion of thinking:

Do you see what I mean?

Can you grasp the meaning?

Or are you still in the dark?

Let me shed more light on the matter.

4 In Butoh, the desire to play with notions of both "masculine" and "feminine" has been expressed in performance methodology by both male and female artists, such as the male and female dancers of Hakutobo Dance Company, led by Hijikata's former principal performer, Yoko Ashikawa. They also appear genderless according to Joan Laage (see 133). Significantly, little in the way of writing in English appears written by or from the perspective of Japanese female Butoh dancers. Moreover, Ashikawa appears more interested in an erasing of hierarchy and personal ego:

Although many people tried to establish the Hijikata myth, they don't know the nameless nature of humankind, self-abandonment, and sacrifice. They should know the nameless nature of butoh. This is the reason why the dancers of Hakutobo always use the family name, 'Ashikawa', and the reason why each dancer has a leading part, because we think everybody is on the same level, and that the leading part has no special value. (Bergmark online)

5 In her writing on *Butoh, Zen and Japan*, Sondra Fraleigh devotes one chapter, "My Mother's Face," to a reflection on the "feminine principle" or the goddess (87-96). Writing in the first person, and embroidering the personal experience of her mother with the wider philosophic experience of Mother, Fraleigh makes a forceful case for the existence and value of the Mother or the Goddess in a number of societies at different historical periods:

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 may not even be experienced in terms of one's own mother but is symbolic of qualities associated

with the mythic feminine wherever it manifests in women and in men...She is yin (in Chinese philosophy), the receptive...Like the dark goddess Kali (in India) and Oya (in Nigeria), the Goddess is also a destroyer. She dances with fire. Like natural disasters, she uproots trees and tears them apart; she is a great leveller...in Japan, she is the clearing away of ego that represents Zen emptiness. We pass through her to come back to ourselves, renewed...just as ancient Demeter and her daughter Persephone passed through the dangers of the underworld and returned to bring forth the fruits of earth in Springtime in Western mythology. (90-91)

Fraleigh later describes other faces of the Mother Goddess in other ages: in Sumerian myth she is Innana, Queen of Heaven, and conversely Ereshkigal, Queen of the Underworld; both whore and holy one in Gnostic gospels, Grace in the gospel of Valentinus: the eternal silence.

6 Could the nature of such a writing, marvellous in its ideal and seeming humanity, if realised in some con-temporary-space, or in some ex-temporary-space, be a forerunner to a another, if paradoxical form of patriarchy?

7 How is this need for myth-making?

8 Is this a prelude for another kind of parental complex??

9 This investigation of course extends beyond the realm of dance. Vandana Shiva writes of reclaiming the "feminine principle." She writes of the Chipko Movement's world view of one where nature is *prakriti*: Nature, the creator and source of wealth. Chipko challenges the notion of "progress" and "enlightenment." Siva attempts the re-conception of *Sakta Tantra* as a means to counter patriarchy. Shiva advocates the embracing of *prakriti* (Nature) as living nature or "feminine principle," a principle that is the entirety of nature, inclusive of its ability to create, sustain and destroy. There is here, ontologically, no divide between human being and nature. I-nature am. The Chipko Movement was begun by largely illiterate women and has had considerable economic, political, social and cultural impact in its areas of operation. It has influentially redefined gender and gender roles in its sphere of activity. Whether such a movement can have substantial pan-South-Asian influence in term so of gender perception remains to be seen.

10 The force of patriarchy has also been highlighted by June Campbell in relation to Tibetan Buddhism. Here the historic Tantric conception of female-male, with the female as active and male as passive, has been reversed by Tibetan Buddhism's notion *yab-yum*. This trend has resulted in the notion of the self-born enlightened tulku, (an example being Dalai Lama), who historically has almost exclusively been male. Campbell points out that

egalitarian ideals of gender equality can fail to materialise when dominant groups in society, selectively use (consciously or unconsciously) philosophical ideals to promote self-interest. Thus, despite the availability, for example of the texts of the

Madhyamika tradition, as propounded by Nagarjuna and later. The Yogacharin epistemological school of Asanga and Vasubandhu, which provided theoretical frameworks for disclosing the dynamics of dualistic thinking, polarity became the central most important metaphor in the Tibetan iconography. (186)

11 Can such historical appropriations ever be reversed or revised in a manner that will have relevance beyond the academic journal to those who are most oppressed by it? For the kind of perception of Tantra that Siva is advocating to be pertinent in con-temporary-space, and to engender further insights, one wonders whether it is necessary for some kind of destruction and displacement to first take place. Campbell posits a similar question. Campbell's analysis is valuable in a number of ways: primarily because she exposes ideas that have emerged in South and East Asia to rigorous contemporary critique. The historic, and still largely current, exotification of such ideas and the culture from which they have emerged, seemingly posits them in a stasis of paratruth. The emergence of critique from any quarter enables those ideas to evolve beyond being fixed as some "historic fundamental truth," and therefore removed from major intellectual discourses. Such fixing also entraps the powerless in the societies from which the ideas have emerged - predominantly composed of women - to pernicious fundamentalism. Campbell borrows from Irigaray to reinforce the significance of her thinking:

When the father refuses to allow the mother her power of giving birth and seeks to be the sole creator [...] he superimposes upon our ancient world of flesh and blood a universe of language and symbols that has no roots in the flesh and drills a hole through the female womb and through the place of female identity. A stake and axis is thus driven into the earth in order to mark out the boundaries of the sacred space in many patriarchal traditions. It defines a meeting place for men that is based upon immolation. Women will in the end be allowed to enter that space, provided they do as nonparticipants. (17)

12 Did you know that telling a joke is supposed to enhance a learning experience?

Have you heard the one about the female tulku?

No.

13 Education is an imperative here, and there are still huge impediments to education access in South Asia, particularly for women. At the same time, education must not be considered simplistically as formal schooling. The Chipko Movement can be perceived as a profound process of education. However so far orthodox Hindu society has also demonstrated considerable rejection of Tantra in its entirety. Tantric adepts also put to a Truth that is discernible. This is problematic in space-times that increasingly question the notion of an ultimate truth that can be discerned by human beings.

14 There is a resonance with *Sankai Juku's* inter-action with constructed lotus plants in Kagemi and Chipko activists embracing of trees for a greater good to a point where the human life may be sacrificed in favour of the tree. Such an action presents a challenge to the narcissistic aspects of humanism, which places the human being centre stage. It is valuable to think of human beings here post-humanistically, as only one relational part of a whole. In this context it is worth considering early Butoh pioneer Akira Kasai's conception of the "community body." His idea de-emphasises the individualism (not individuality) of the performer - echoing Yoko Ashikawa - and focuses more on the wider landscape (see Fraleigh 228-241). Interviewed by Fraleigh, Kasai says:

There are natural elements in Butoh. But the dance is not an ecological movement or a political movement. It is a movement toward healing, just as certain words and movements can heal [...]. As we move into the twenty-first century I see that dance will divide into two streams - one more technical and mechanical, and the other one connecting intuitively to the earth. (237)

In physics there are schools of thought that have asserted through the twentieth century that the very fact that an individual may test something changes that thing. It is already more than thirty years since John Wheeler, (who conceived the idea of black holes) wrote:

Nothing is more important than this, that it destroys the concept of the world as "sitting out there," with the observer safely separated from it by a 20 centimeter slab of plate glass. Even to observe so miniscule an object as an electron, he must shatter the glass. He must reach in. He must install his chosen measuring equipment. It is up to him to decide whether he shall measure position or momentum. To install the equipment to measure one prevents and excludes his installing the equipment to measure the other. Moreover the measurement changes the state of the electron. The universe will never afterwards be the same. To describe what has happened, one has to cross out that old word "observer" and put in its place the new word "participator." In some strange sense the universe is a participatory universe. (244)

15 The images in the book, *Sankai Juku*, on the whole seem to de-emphasise the notion of the "body-in-relation" and give a heightened sense of the anthropocentric, a body-individuum. The images presented consequently have more of a narcissistic quality. Perhaps this is one of the problems for any theatre company, but particularly one that is undergoing some kind of Butoh exploration, when it becomes renowned and joins a global circuit of major international touring theatres such as Sadlers Wells in London, and Théâtre de la Ville in Paris. Consciously or unconsciously one develops a particular "cult of personality" by the nature of such tours and the nature of audience's relation to the artist and what is presented on stage. Furthermore, as many Japanese now comment, Japan's spiritual mother is now no longer China but the U.S.A. Whatever the accuracy of such perception, it is evident in Japan today, that if one were, crudely, to use the spurious term "western," then Japan could appears

at space-times more "western" than the "West." Paradoxically there are conceivably more "Buddhists" living on the West Coast of the United States than in India.

16 The "linear" journey as metaphor is one that is deeply embedded in contemporary culture around the globe. Lakoff and Johnson write of the primary metaphors in their (North American) and other cultures as being "purposes are destinations" and "actions are motions:" "In our culture, there is a profoundly influential folk model according to which people are supposed to have a purpose in life, and there is something wrong with you if you don't. If you are purposeless, you are seen as 'lost,' 'without direction in your life, as not knowing which way to turn'" (60-61). A life that exhibits as a "non-linear narrative" is less valued. They remind us that the Latin term *curriculum vitae* means a course of life.

17 A typical view of some of my students when encountering Butoh for the first time is that it is boring because there is "no action." This kind of experience is replicated by some other students of mine when watching Tarkovsky's *Stalker*, *Mirror* or *Nostalgia*. How is "boring?" Hayao Kawai writes of a study where Japanese fairy tales were presented to "western children" who found them dissatisfying, "boring" because "nothing happens:" there is no action. Historically Japanese art could be described as an art of *ma* (signifying many things including "space-time," "emptiness," "interval"). Zeami writes of the *Noh* Theatre: "what the actor does not do is of interest: the actor does just enough to create a blank space-time where nothing is done," (Komparu 73) and a journey is made.

18 How is "boring?" Is the action in the story or in the "mind?"

19 To what extent are such archetypal images helpful in con-temporary-space? When, where and how is "form" engendering of cloud and when, where and how can it be engendering of clarity. How, when and where can iconoclastic practice usefully serve?

20 The introduction of Butoh in Japan was deeply disturbing. The first Butoh performance, *Kinjiki (Forbidden Colours)*, created by Tatsumi Hijikata in 1958, caused deep repulsion amongst its spectators. This audience comprised many from the Japanese modern dance establishment. Some were physically sick. Others could not bear to remain in the theatre and left (no mean feat by Hijikata in a society where there is an esteem and obligation on human beings to "endure.") The content of *Kinjiki* was inspired by Genet; and *Kinjiki* took name and inspiration from Yukio Mishima's book. The forbidden colour was that of homosexuality, a profoundly taboo subject. Hijikata perceived homosexuality positively in a society that had made it into a non-subject. The staged buggery was a defining moment in Japanese performing art. The manifestation of Butoh in Europe and North America was also a disturbing experience for many. Such disturbance is inherently necessary in the kinds of

dialectical process at play here. However, over the last forty years one has witnessed in performance art a number of practitioners exploring body mutilation and other acts that were initially highly disturbing. Artists such as Ron Athey and Franko B have explored and continue to explore cutting. All avant-garde practices have their time. Eventually they lose their ability to provoke their spectators in the same way as they had initially done. One can perceive an aspect of an audience's need to be titillation, of finding a new sensual gratification, a new "flavour-of-the-month." At the same time, as aforementioned, disturbance is necessary. Meditation is not as commonly perceived a tranquil process but a liminal process.

21 Seeing can be a blinding process as Paul discovered on the road to Damascus. The process of un-doing can be profoundly painful. If we are ill-equipped to deal with it then it can also be destroying. Christmas Humphreys points out that Zen is not psychotherapy or an alternative to psychotherapy for those who are mentally ill. According to Humphreys one needs to begin "healthy" to undertake this path. Ironically the film-maker Paul Schrader when asked what is the most important thing for a filmmaker, he responded simply with "his health." Yet how and where is folie, un-reason; and where is un-reason unravelling?

22 In Akira Kurosawa's film *Rashomon*, several characters tell a story, each interpreting a supposed sequence of events in their own way. Kurosawa exhibits the relativity of truth, and therefore its lack. For Kurosawa human beings, as the characters in the film, "are unable to be honest with themselves about themselves" (189). They need to embellish a story, their story, because to tell it as they saw it would be too painful, too difficult, too revealing. For reasons of some kind of self preservation they cannot face this mirror. For Hijikata, "the reason we suffer anxiety is that we are not able to deal with our fears" (Viala, and Masson Sekine, 188).

23 How is this need for myth-making?

24 British cultural policy, through organisations such as the Arts Council, in the past has emphasised "accessibility" of art in a tone that smacked less of availability and more on dumbing down. Certainly my numerous discussions with art producers and managers have engendered such a perception. An art work may actually be impenetrable. On the whole such a work would not have been funded, unless the artist was in some sense a "superstar," a demi-god, in the eyes of the producer/curator/administrator. An art work may be opaque in a particular age and later become "comprehensible" to a new audience. The language that has been previously used by policy-makers and implementers has also laid too much responsibility at the door of the artist or cultural producer to make work that is "understood." Not enough emphasis in policy documents has been placed on strategies for nurturing an "art

of the spectator," which ultimately is a more democratic, liberating process.

25 If the emphasis of arts and cultural policy moves away from a system that is still predominantly weighted toward the appreciation of artwork, artist, and increasingly the appreciation of the critic, and shifts toward the development of an "art of the spectator," such an art could be thought of as a liminal practice rather than a liminoid one: something which could be a perception of the contemporary world of the art.

26 How is this "art of the spectator?" Even if desired, is it realisable? This is where an iconoclastic reconceiving of Tantra, and in part Zen, in con-temporary-space could be pertinent. Could a benchmark of liminality be the idealist aspiration, as one Buddhist sage describes it, "the art of living long fulfilled lives?" It is worth noting here that the life of a Zen monk (in the monastery) is conceived as a preparatory one only, before the acolyte returns to the mundane world of the everyday, where he or she may experience a more profound enlightenment through her/his very engagement with that world. The import of the destructive force of the *prakriti* should be remembered for even such an ideal to re-surface beyond its initial cultural, historical sites.

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