

The un-seeing eyes of the foot  
(In memoriam Kazuo Ohno)

Johannes Birringer

1. Just Visiting this Planet

*I am old horse with young heart* (Kazuo Ohno)<sup>1</sup>

There is a scene in Peter Sempel's cult film from the early 1990s, *Just Visiting this Planet*, which took my breath away when I first saw it in a run-down cultural arts center in Dresden, not too long after the Wall had come down and traveling to the former communist East of Germany reopened some windows into the historical past, allowing rediscovery of an early phase of modern dance and art practically forgotten and buried in the ruins of a long and devastated 20<sup>th</sup> century. In this scene, a white horse is seen galloping down New York City's Fifth Avenue, surely an apparition and yet, repeatedly, associated with the equally ghostly appearance of Kazuo Ohno dancing a fragile impression of his mother, perhaps, or of an unsuspecting child-like visitor from outer space, dipping his feet into this time at the edges of these urban dwellings. A few trees become visible too, growing from their roots in Central Park.

It appeared that Ohno, one of the pioneers of butoh, who passed away in 2010 aged 103 years, was improvising on some rooftop (or was it a side walk?), dressed in a loose white chemise and floating above the street where the horse was seen, a rose delicately held in his hand and the other hand drawing invisible lines into night sky. Now he bends, his head lowering down and the long arms are stretched out, he dances becoming a flower, he blossoms into the night. As the scene of this apparitional dance lingers in the imagination, the filmmaker cuts to Blixa Bargeld, the lead singer of the experimental band Einstürzende Neubauten, who sings a harrowing Schubert song from *Die Winterreise*, a lyrical composition evoking a dense, desolate emotional landscape, from the hardcore repertoire of German Romanticism.

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<sup>1</sup> Citation provided by filmmaker Peter Sempel in personal conversation, October 5, 2011. Sempel's film was released in 1991 (35mm, 100 min., color/black & white); it was shown for the first time in the UK during the ARTAUD FORUM 1: The World Within and Without, April 4-5, 2011, Brunel University, London. <http://people.brunel.ac.uk/dap/artaudforum.html>.

After this musical entr'acte, the film returns to Ohno, showing a sequence of close ups in which attention is drawn to the dancer's feet, as he floats on the sidewalk, in the night, the tall towers of the World Trade Center in the background. Very small steps. Our attention is directed at the fragile figure in his dancefrock, who at age 84 seems to be delicately balancing his weight to step forward into the dark. "If you cannot do it, try! Always you must try! Do the impossible. Don't think!" (subtitles). But there is nothing delicate in Ohno's step, only youthful strength in the wakeful slow pace creating space, moved by the space in which he is immersed, the body slightly twisted and in connection with everything there is, and with the spirits inhabiting this body. The buildings in the back are mere phantoms in the dark.

[Cut]

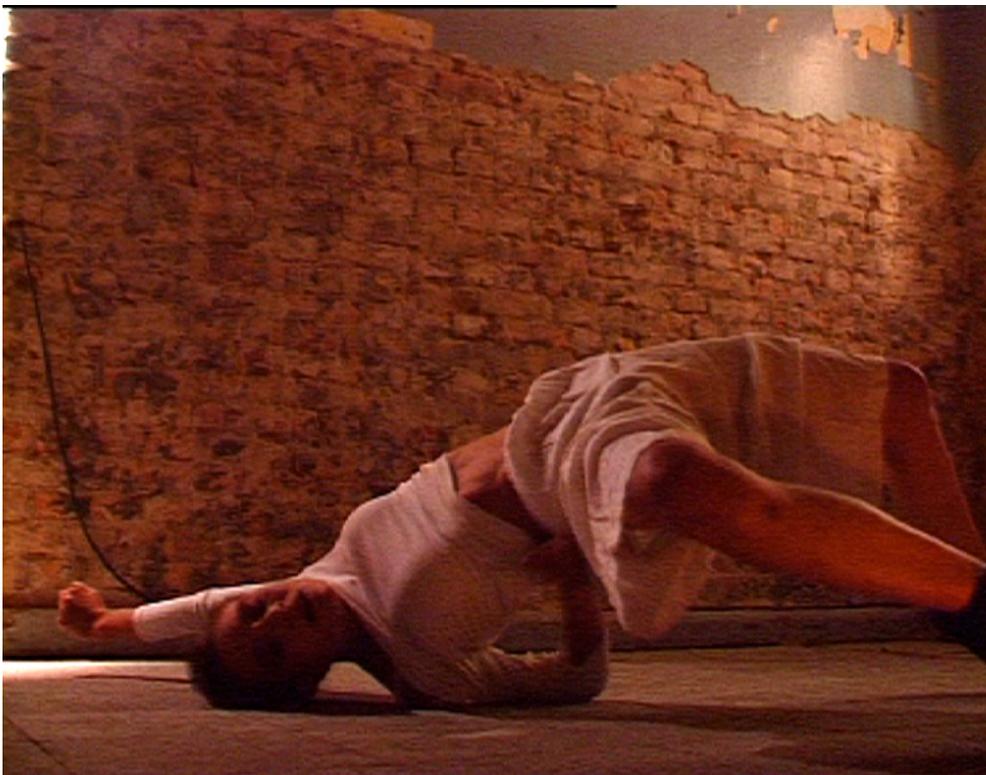


Johannes Birringer drinking the blood of Amfortas, *Parsifal*, Festspielhaus Hellerau 1995 © Photo Jo Siamon Salich

The day after the film screening I went to visit the Hellerau Festspielhaus on the outskirts of Dresden, eventually finding the dilapidated monument to an early avant-garde moment in history, cut short by the First World War. For nearly fifty years it had remained hidden from view in a Soviet-occupied military facility. Émile Jacques-Dalcroze and Adolphe Appia had worked here for a few years (1910-1914), establishing a school and a performance center exploring a new vision of musical theatre and dance founded upon a holistic philosophy of body-mind centering and eurhythmic training, tuning the senses towards the intricate connections between music, rhythm, movement, light, and, as Appia called it, "indefinite space" (Beacham 2006: 82). In 1912,

Dalcroze staged a notorious *Orpheus and Eurydike* production filled with hallucinatory choral passages of dancers descending the rhythmic spaces/steps designed by Appia. When I began to work at Hellerau in 1994, the Great Hall was definitely an indefinite space, gutted and hollowed out, in a depressed condition with water leaking through its broken roof. The stone floor was cracked, one stepped into the small puddles of water that had collected, tripped over shards of broken glass. I collaborated on a site-specific installation-performance of *Parsifal*, enacting my father and my mother in two empty rooms off the dusty east corridor, dressed in a purple sequinned gown I had borrowed from mother.

I placed a microphone on the floor, near the shards, amplifying the crackling sound caused by my feet dancing on glass. A bucket had been placed to receive the water drops from the ceiling. In the next room, Imma Sarries-Zgonc performed an attenuated solo on the floor, slowly distorting her body downward into the ground, spiralling and listening to the breaking glass as it crunched and crackled. The amplified sound of dripping water reverberated in the voluminous space. In the next room, Jo Siamon Salich was entrapped in tubes twisted around his body, blood circulating through the tubal veins before leaking into the ground.



Imma Sarries-Zgonc, *Parsifal*, Festspielhaus Hellerau 1995 © Photo Jo Siamon Salich



Jo Siamon Salich as dying Amfortas, *Parsifal*, Festspielhaus Hellerau 1995 © Photo J. Birringer

The ritual elements in this Wagnerian fantasia were drenched in irony, every action a slow moving and cascading descent into a buried past, eyes wide shut and bodies turned upside down touching the “lateral space down there” (Ohno and Ohno 2004: 41). Ohno speaks of the prostrate figure symbolically taking leave of this world, “falling” from one realm into another, and listening to the ground that is being integrated fully into the performance. Butoh is an earthward dance, connecting to life’s soul as if it were lifting earth itself. In Ohno’s dance, unlike Hijikata’s, there was no darkness but an unbearable frail lightness as if movement were looking *through*, never at.

[Cut]

September 1, 2011. We are at an international workshop, Choreolab III (Krems, Austria), dedicated to the exploration of “(E)MOTION FREQUENCY deceleration.”<sup>2</sup> Yoshito Ohno, the

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<sup>2</sup> The third International ChoreoLab Austria examined the desire for deceleration in the complex interface of motion and emotion. Organized by Sebastian Prantl (Tanz Atelier Wien), 36 participants worked on the campus of Donau Universität Krems, Austria, for the duration of 10 days in late August 2011.

son of the late Kazuo, enters the studio space and announces he will dance a brief prayer, to be dedicated to the people who suffered from the tsunami catastrophe in March 2011. After this he will open his workshop demonstration and some recollections of the long history of butoh, from the beginnings in 1959 with his teacher Tatsumi Hijikata.<sup>3</sup> When he initiates the dance of prayer and slowly moves in a circular motion, he is wearing a rabbit costume, or rather, a small white embroidered cape and a headband with (children's) plush rabbit ears. For a few moments, I think he is dancing “becoming rabbit,” but it cannot be. There is too much irony for me, as he slowly sinks, becoming very small, holding his spine upright as he goes to his roots. Then the irony subsides too and evaporates, and over the course of the next two hours, I listen to the movement and the stories that Ohno tells. On the next day, in the studio, I will be given a rose.



Yoshito Ohno dancing in the Choreolab III, Krems 2011 © Tanz Atelier Wien, Photo Michael Renner

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<sup>3</sup> Originated in Japan during the 1950-60s, butoh (bu: ‘to dance’; tō: ‘to stomp’) as transmitted by the first-generation butoh dancer Yoshito Ohno is an existential and transformative way of knowing, aimed at realizing a non-dualistic awareness of body-and-mind to be manifested through dance. Tatsumi Hijikata, the principal founder of butoh whose Kinjiki (Forbidden Colours) premiered in 1959, is considered responsible for the trope of darkness, ankoku butoh, in the butoh tradition, whereas his contemporary Kazuo Ohno represents a lighter, more gentle, lyrical, melancholic, playful, trans-sexual version of the dance form and, as Sondra Fraleigh argues, the ‘healing alchemy’ of the ‘body that becomes’ and is in empathy with others (cf. Fraleigh 2010: 16-17).

I have to start again, from a place that can leave irony or pathos behind, and even as I resist regression, and child-like wondering at the world and at being alive moving with a beautiful synthetic rose, I still move there with the others, being inside the collective even as I imagine not belonging to such space. I focus attention to my feet, eyes closed, touching ground. In the workshop, we change rhythms, and we become aware of our emotions, through movement above all, not sound, or memory. Movement stirs up; Ohno had done this numerous times as he evoked Hijikata, and also the (difficult) relationship to his father Kazuo. But movement is also memory in our bones, and motion is like a wave or a compression of many different waves. Ohno, after the rabbit, shows us a print of Hokusai's *Fugaku sanjurokkei: Kanagawaoki namiura* (The Great Wave off Kanagawa), and points to its contrasts. The drawing shows the vast power of nature (the waves appear larger than Mount Fuji) and relative smallness of humans (the heads of a boat crew are as small as speckles of the foam). The sea splashes into a chaotic light foam to be dispersed by the wind.

## 2. Don't look with your eyes

When Kazuo Ohno admonished the dancers at the beginning of a workshop: “Don’t look with your eyes, don’t look!”, he was suggesting that we focus our awareness, and attention to the world, on the entirety of the core of body and soul as sensory receptor organs. This method, not unlike Antonin Artaud’s struggle with the hierarchical organization (organism) of the theatre and the human body, deconstructs conventional perception and looking out, looking at. It shifts attention to the necessity of “looking” with the underside of the foot, transforming feet into eyes or into receptors which, like animal or insect reflexes, react to a boundless universe, the tactile senses replacing the need to see as we imagine the sky underneath the toes. It further suggests, as a metaphysical principle, a downward, dissolving direction. The feet are the hands and lips touching the earth’s body.



Kazuo Ohno, in *Just Visiting this Planet*, directed by Peter Sempel, 1991 © Courtesy of P. Sempel.

Beyond the paradox of unseeing/seeing, the philosophical and existential emphasis in butoh is clearly on the soul, on feeling the soul in motion – a proposition we may not find easy to analyze and parse out. Ohno's workshops were metaphysical encounters, not directed at method or understanding but at essential, existential dimensions of living and a spiritual grasp of the love of movement, unconsciously. We are not conscious of our feet when we walk, or rather, the conscious and unconscious are a continuum of one body-mind. Body-mind centring and meditational processes are core philosophies, in this sense of the spiritual, of engaging the senses of becoming, of becoming being-time. This time, if we acknowledge it as existential, emerges slowly in a not-self-conscious, but awakened slow pace creating and created by the space where one is immersed. It is space not already made, but living and moving it instead makes the dance.

On a practical level, for the dancer it is important to consider attention, breath, energy, flow, body orientation, positioning and distribution, how motion is focussed on one's awareness, cellular consciousness and awareness of everything (self and other, body and environment) and especially of the internal experience of this completeness of body-mind transforming in every moment, taking in the world. None of this should be considered arcane. In butoh practice, as with other

meditational practices that involve deceleration to reflect on multiple layers of personal and collective influences on how to live one's life in the present and become aware and 'take time,' connections are made that touch upon the most subjective fields of questioning who we are, as the persons we believe to be in/as inter-relation – connections between birth and death and the very (un)conscious body-mind-awareness deriving from one's individual journey through life. And focussing on breath, it should come as no surprise within such cosmology and within such transformative practice of knowing, always involves the intangible relation we have to what I am here calling 'soul.' Imbuing dance with life, Ohno suggested, means letting the soul lead, and the body will follow (Ohno and Ohno 2004: 199). How do we let the soul lead? Here the "workshop words," recorded in Yoshito Ohno's transcriptions of his father's teaching, give us at least some indication as to the significance of the feet in the performing, and this is spelled out in the teachings on the "eye."

We, as performers, need to give careful consideration to how the eye and body interact. It's essential to grasp where exactly the eye is located and how it functions. Moreover, there are things that cannot be seen with the eyes. For a butoh dancer, the entire body must become a receptor organ for light. By this, I mean that the eyes are not our sole visual link with the exterior world. The entire body, from head to foot, is capable of visually assimilating our immediate surroundings. In a performing context, Kazuo's eyes don't, in fact, look *at* things in a conventional sense of looking *out* on one's immediate surroundings; his gaze is also fastened on what is happening inside the body... Onstage, Kazuo's eyes, while continuing to focus on his surroundings, pass down through the body and cling tightly to the soles of his feet. By attaching themselves to the feet, their gaze becomes more penetrating, for the body itself then begins to respond to external stimuli (Ohno and Ohno: 2004: 24).

The whole body is our sensorium, and feet, like ears, hands, spine and skin, have ontogenetically evolved to enable all the connectivity patterns to unfold and organize themselves in overlapping modes (and the kind of cross-modal perceptions studied in psychology and the research on synaesthesia). The touch of the soles is also a double movement, in that they act upon the world as well as receiving the action of the ground on them. Touching, hard or delicate, is a complex action-sensation and pertains to the non-dualistic conception of the relations between body and mind; the soles make contact with ground and yet ground, for Ohno, is merely a continuum of the planes of invisible realms of being.

Compared to the "non-seeing eyes" in Kazuo's performance cosmology, which suggests that walking out on stage first implies that the soles of the feet become like eyes and that not-looking with eyes enhances the resonant "ear-body" and expands perception to all body membranes (cf.

Manco 2011: 274)<sup>4</sup>, the emphasis on the feet is of course also a feature of the Suzuki training method, and it recurs throughout the many teachings – for example the body weather workshops held at Min Tanaka’s farm and then in Australia and elsewhere – that have been spawned both by butoh masters and Tadashi Suzuki’s Toga workshops. The feet, for Suzuki, are anchoring connectors to the earth and our animal energies; consciousness of the body's communication with the ground gives the actor a greater awareness of all the physical junctions of the body. In Suzuki’s classes, the teaching method is quite severe, following a series of “disciplines” (*kunren*). One participant describes the “Stamping” discipline:

All twenty performers stand in a circle onstage. The torso is held upright, straight, firmed into a solid block. Suzuki corrects any posture that is loose, twisted, or slack. Arms are held down or arched away from the sides, the fingers curved into a light fist. Knees are turned out and sharply bent into a trapezoidal, or "box," position. The posture is from kabuki, but more extreme. An assistant plays a tape of "Shinnai Banashi," a popularized version of a kabuki melody that has a driving beat. Knees deeply flexed, actors circle the stage, stamping in time to the music. Flat feet strike directly under the center of the body. There is fierce concentration. Every part of the body is held motionless except pile-driver legs and feet. The sound is deafening. We are on the second floor of this tiny building and with each rhythmic foot stamp, the whole structure bounces.... The music lasts three minutes. Silence. Actors freeze, then collapse to the floor in heaps (Brandon 1978: 31).

But how does one perceive with the underside of the foot, and why is stamping, in Suzuki’s training, given such importance?<sup>5</sup> Is the focus on low gravitational centering and “animal” energy flow a necessary preparation for the actor’s creative work? Suzuki, and Anne Bogard who followed him in her physical actor training (which she named Viewpoints), believes that his “grammar of the feet” develops the actor’s inner physical sensibilities, building the will, stamina and concentration. Many of Suzuki’s exercises are centered around the use of the feet in relation to one’s central alignment, and while these exercises are designed to throw the body off center, they help actors to maintain a consistent level of energy and stability of the upper body. The energy necessary to accomplish the tasks, a variety of specially designed intense stomping and walking exercises, as well as breath control and extreme focus and concentration, is considerable

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<sup>4</sup> For an eloquent examination of embodied hearing and listening, inspired by Zen Buddhist practice but relying on a non-transcendental form of spirituality, see Manco’s essay “Ear Bodies, Ear Lines,” *Performing Arts Journal* 94 (2010), pp. 99-107.

<sup>5</sup> The creation myth underlying Japanese *noh* and *kabuki* traditions is worth repeating here: Amaterasu, the Shinto sun goddess, became angry when her brother, the storm-god Susanowa, ravaged the earth, and she retreated to a cave because of the noise. Her disappearance deprived the world of light and life, and demons ruled the earth. The other gods tried lure her out, without success. Finally it was Uzume who succeeded, dancing on an overturned rain barrel, stamping with her feet, raising her skirt and exposing her genitals. The laughter of the gods watching her comical and obscene dance aroused Amaterasu's curiosity, and she emerged from her cave. The sacred *kagura* dances, ritual dances performed to pacify angry ghosts, are considered the origin of *noh* derived from Uzume’s dance (cf. Allain 2003: 38), and Suzuki and the butoh masters refer back to this myth in their own fusions of old and new, rural and urban, Eastern and Western cultural forms.

and constitutes the primary focus of this work. In exploring the juxtaposition of movement and stillness, actors stamp rhythmically and repeatedly, then maintain very long periods of complete immobility. Suzuki claims that it is the feet, the only part of the body constantly in touch with the earth, that support all human activity. The training implies that the actor forms a new body, a virtual one ready to transport her/him. To let a dance begin.



Biyo Kikuchi and her friends in the performance *From Listening*, May 2011 © Courtesy of the artist

### 3. Inside Outside

In his evocation of tarantism, Fabrizio Manco speaks of the tarantata's body as an "ear-body," a vibrational body renewed by being danced by sound, floored by the difficulty of having an erect position, establishing a bond with gravity while being unhinged by the bite of the spider or the psychophysical effects of its imagined, tranced symptoms (Manco 2011: 274-75). The trance-inducing power of sonic vibrations, which Artaud had conjured, in his vision of a theatre of

cruelty, as the “crude means” to bring the audience “back to the subtlest ideas through their anatomies” (Artaud 2010: 58), pervades and possesses the body within a space of rhythmic percussive sounds. The feet-body is ear-body enlivened through all sensorial channels of embodied hearing and listening, waves flowing through the bones, muscles, tendons and tissues as primary aural and tactile experiences. The un-seeing eyes of the foot thus refer us to this essential ground of being and the “animal energy” of the lower body (Suzuki), suppressed by the privileged perceptual prisms and filters associated with vision, the symbolic, language, media and reproduction technologies. Far from being a reductionist phenomenology, the vitalist conception of the body, aided by an “arborescent model” of the internal scaffolding of bone that finds its structural base in feet containing 27 bones each (Pont 2009: 2), allows us to ponder gravitational consciousness as a consciousness of the body’s architecture in which there is no conflict between outside and inside, weight and lightness, the earth and the moon. They are experienced mutually generating. Receiving and working with the force of gravity, rather than fighting it – listening to the wind sweeping through you, as Kazuo Ohno might say – opens and imbricates movement’s relationships to surface: interior space partakes so intimately of exterior space that movement seen from the outside coincides with movement lived or seen from the inside. Indeed, José Gil argues, “this is what happens in danced trance, where no space is left free outside of the consciousness of the body” (Gil 2006: 23).

### 3. The “Artaud System”

The movement method I learnt from Japanese artists who came to my studio in London in 2010 does not prepare the performer to let the dance begin; rather, the strangely named “Artaud System,” developed by Hironobu Oikawa at his Maison d’Artaud in Tokyo, does not distinguish between training and performance as much as it offers a holistic and existential path to collect the body into its unfoldings, drawing our attention, again, to a listening to circuits: the Chinese system of meridians or energy flows circulating the body.<sup>6</sup>

Although named after Artaud, Oikawa’s butoh practice is deeply inspired by Chinese natural philosophy of the five elements (wood, fire, earth, metal, water) and their motions, and the Qigong system we applied uses a mixture of approaches, combining dynamic, static, meditative

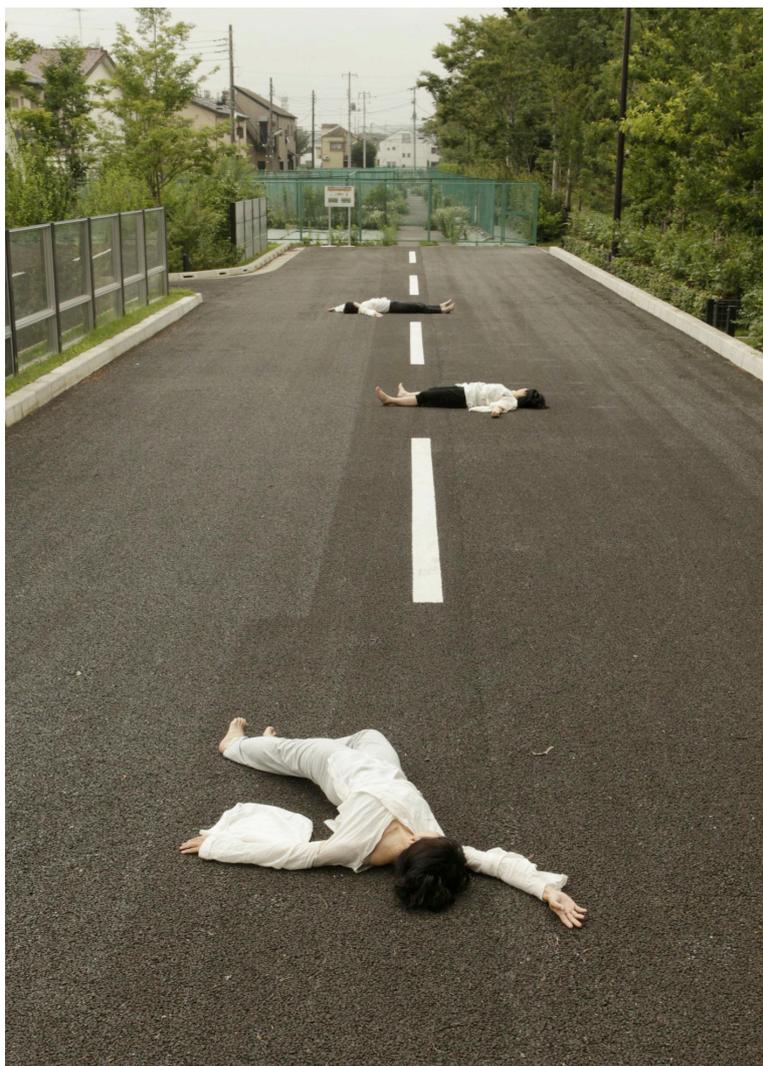
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<sup>6</sup> Oikawa sensei, who had studied mime with Decroux and theatre with Barrault, discovered Artaud’s interest in esoteric Buddhism and introduced Artaud to Japan in the 1960s, later founding his Maison d’Artaud and creating work exploring the relation between dance and mime with first generation butoh dancers such as Tatsumi Hijikata and Yoshito Ohno. He has been a director/producer who presented, for example, Saburo Teshigawara’s early work in the 1980s.

and interactional patterns, again with an arborescent conception of the body's skeletal scaffolding but one that encourages rhizomatic modifications and perturbations, the matter of organs (or the body with organs) dripping away across the depthless surfaces of the ground. I was drawn again to open my feet, noting that the dance had already begun and we were breaking any hierarchically controlled rhythms of time (or breathing) to fall out of sync, decelerating, curling, crawling, limbs rippling and twining, crouching legs, pelvis askew, then falling landing on the side, contracting, as movement grows smaller and smaller, toes spread like hieroglyphs.

What I was also drawn to was the connection I made between the lightness of gravity and the (ethical) impossibility to separate oneself from the ordinary life of society in spite of the critical urge to transform ourselves, to surmount self-imposed constraints. The teacher asked me to imagine my bones and my arboretic structures and the surfaces on which my bones move. I had to forget all my muscles and work from the toes up, beginning with the fifty-four bones in my two feet. Later, someone mentioned that the Samurai has to go through all these steps, and rather than becoming better at fighting or defending, he was to become better at non-violence and surrender.

[Cut]



Biyo Kikuchi and her friends in the performance *From Listening*, May 2011 © Courtesy of the artist

A few months after the Japanese dancers had left London,<sup>7</sup> we heard of the tsunami and the Fukushima Nuclear Reactor catastrophe in Japan. One of the dancers, Biyo Kikuchi, who had studied with Kazuo Ohno and Hironobu Oikawa, decided to go into the field and perform a response to the events that caused such fear and confusion. She wrote me that she had been staying close to the disaster area, recognizing the strength of the tsunami and reflecting about our rational and efficient civilization and how fragile life on this earth can be. She sited the performance near the Tamagawajousui waterway where a new asphalt road (which the local people did not need nor want) was built after the construction cleared away valuable farm land. “We listened and felt the past and now and from now, about now our situation, not by TV or PC but by our body. We had the silent time, to just only listen with our body under the sky. It seemed

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<sup>7</sup> Biyo Kikuchi, Yumi Sagara, and Jun Makime danced with our DAP-Lab ensemble in the London premiere of *UKIYO [Moveable Worlds]* at Sadlers’ Wells in November 2010.<  
[http://people.brunel.ac.uk/dap/Ukiyo\\_Sadlerswells.html](http://people.brunel.ac.uk/dap/Ukiyo_Sadlerswells.html) >

a good way to dance or pray” (Kikuchi 2011).

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Kazuo Ohno, Japan’s last Romantic, the Parsifal of this late modern era, is now a *Yūgen* spirit, *éternellement*, just as he had hoped: “Even on taking leave of my flesh and bones, I want to continue dancing as a ghost.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The word *Yūgen* relates an ambience of mystery, transience, darkness and melancholy; in a Buddhist context, it alludes to the ultimate truth that cannot be grasped through the intellect. *Yūgen* is a poetic principle and one of the main tenets of the *noh* aesthetic. Ohno’s vision of dancing on (Ohno and Ohno 2004: 295) comes at the end of ‘Workshop Words’, his teachings and working method which his son encapsulates in the first half of the book as ‘Food for the Soul.’ I take my inspiration for commenting on roots, ghosts, and spirits from these two interwoven halves of writings on living-dancing. I also wish to acknowledge the fascinating, wide-ranging debate I was privileged to curate in October 2011 about the ChoreoLab theme of “[E]MOTION FREQUENCY deceleration,” with twenty-five artist/scientist participants on the empyre maillist: <http://lists.cofa.unsw.edu.au/pipermail/empyre/>. Special thanks to Michael Weiss and his exposition of “Creating and Performing Existential Fields of Knowledge Reflections on a Choreolab” during this debate.

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