BUTOH AND EMBODIED TRANSFORMATION

Max Liljefors

ABSTRACT
The Japanese avant-garde dance form *butoh*, founded by Hijikata Tatsumi in the late 1950s, is known for its marked physicality. The choreographic methodology of butoh, however, is not focused primarily on instructing the dancers how to move their bodies. Instead, the dancers work with verbal and mental imagery to transform into *butoh-tai*, the "butoh body," a special form of embodiment from which the dance is thought to unfold as its external manifestation. I propose that this is an aesthetic process that can be explained by a combination of theories from empirical and philosophical aesthetics, about empathy, embodied simulation, and the body schema. These theories, which hypothesize an inner, neural body at work in the aesthetic experience, shed light both on the crucial role of imagination in butoh, and on a potential for transformation inherent in the aesthetic experience per se.

KEYWORDS
Butoh, Embodied Simulation, Body Schema, Hijikata Tatsumi, SU-EN, Robert Vischer, Vittorio Gallese, John Dewey

Imagine if the reader could scoop up these very words in her hand, and all the sentences in this article, toss them into the air and let them rain down in a gentle drizzle that wets her hair, face, and shoulders—and, just like that, she would *know* what this article wants to say.

An unlikely scenario, but if this image of meaning metamorphizing into matter, of language turned into a liquid substance soaking the reader's mind or brain, evokes some sort of physical sensation in the reader, then, the gist of this article has in a sense already been conveyed.

This is so because my argument starts out from an assumption that can be phrased in a nutshell as follows: we are endowed not with one, but two bodies, one outer, anatomical, visible body, and one inner, neural, invisible body, and the latter can act and react also when nothing happens to the former. Or, even more condensed: our inner body can act *as if* our outer body did so, even when it doesn't.

These homespun formulations are my bid at capturing the gist of what is a multilayered scholarly discourse about embodiment as the foundation of our aesthetic experiences. Of course, we don't actually have two bodies and our anatomical and neural layouts are components of one and the same body. But in the discourse that I refer to, aesthetic experiences are thought of as embodied, not only because they come to us through our senses, but because they are seen as a sort of resonance between, on the one hand, the outer world that we inhabit as corporeal creatures, and on the other, our internal neurological processes.

In what follows, I draw on certain strands of this discourse for my interpretation of a particular case of aesthetic expression, the Japanese avant-garde dance form *butoh*. More precisely, the interpretation concerns an experience described by many butoh practitioners of turning into *something else* in and through the dance, in a markedly embodied way. This metamorphosis is understood as the dancer transforming into *butoh-tai*, the butoh body, a state of embodiment different from and more malleable than our everyday bodily awareness. The dance is then thought to unfold out of *butoh-tai* as its outer manifestation. Here, I refer to this bodily metamorphosis felt by the dancer as "embodied transformation."

Before turning to the art form of butoh, a word about my choice of theoreticians in this article. As mentioned, embodiment as the

foundation for our aesthetic experiences has become the focus of a polyvocal academic discourse. At its heart lies the understanding that our elemental capacity for kinesthesia or proprioception—that is, our body's wired-in ability of sensing and gauging how its parts relate to each other and to its surround, and the potentialities for action and movement that these relations entail—is what makes it possible for us to comport ourselves aesthetically to the world. And accordingly, our aesthetic experiences articulate for us these fundamental conditions of our existence as embodied beings. In regards to dance specifically, dancer and dance scholar Maxine Sheets-Johnstone's seminal work *The Primacy of Movement* has played an important role in further scholarship.[1]

Within this discourse, the insight that aesthetics is grounded in our neurobiology on the ontogenetic as well as the phylogenetic level is a cornerstone. From there, however, scholars often take diverging routes, depending perhaps foremost on whether their outlook is informed by phenomenology or empirical aesthetics—in the latter case, especially neuroaesthetics—which are two major scholarly approaches in the field.[2] The tension between these approaches comes to the fore in an article by Sheets-Johnstone, where the author criticizes neuroscientist Vittorio Gallese, who is an important reference in my argument below, for reducing the lived experience of movement to a mere effect of neural mechanisms in our brains, the so-called mirror neurons.[3] The issue here is one of origins: do we have kinesthetic ability because we are endowed with neural mirroring mechanisms, or, do these neural mechanisms develop from our "tactile-kinesthetic/affective" experiences, beginning already in the prenatal phase?

For this article, the issue of developmental origins is of little concern, but it translates into a larger question about the hierarchy of the respective scholarly outlooks: should we give primacy to the phenomenological study of our lived experience of movement, or, to the empirical study of neural mechanisms, mechanisms that we cannot feel as such (that is, *as* neurons, synapses, etc.)? Below, I interfoliate these two sources of knowledge through references to testimonies from butoh dancers, and to experimental findings from empirical aesthetics. How, then, do they relate to each other? Gallese holds that neural mirror mechanisms "underpin" our aesthetic experiences, Sheets-Johnstone objects that our experiences of kinesthesia "undergird" the development of mirror neurons.[4] The term "under," used by both scholars, is a spatial metaphor implying that

whichever factor has this position serves to *explain* what is posited as being "above" it. The word "explain" is itself a spatial metaphor which, as art historian David Summer has noted in another context, suggests that the explained object is *ex-plained*, rendered planar, flattened out.[5] To explain a phenomenon, then, would be tantamount to depriving it of its intrinsic "depth," that is, the richness and value it holds in its own right. At least, that is how I read the thrust of Sheets-Johnstone's critique of Gallese's neuroscientific approach—it renders experience flat.

I don't have a particular stance on scholarly primacy. Therefore, I have opted to label my argument, not an explanation but an interpretation of butoh—a word whose Latin etymology suggests a translation or trade between different positions without any hierarchy of truth being established between them. To put it simply, I believe that both perspectives add to our understanding, and if we find them partly incompatible, that insight too enriches our understanding, and we should live with the incongruence.

Two more things. Much, albeit not all, scholarship on embodied aesthetic resonance focuses on, on one side, a beholder, and on the other, an artwork such as a painting or dance performance which the beholder takes in through her senses, most notably sight. My take here is different: the topic is embodied transformation in the butoh dancer, and so, aesthetic resonance is understood as part of the creative act, not the act of beholding an artwork. Also, while perception plays a significant role, my main focus is on another faculty, namely imagination, our capacity for inner vision.

In what follows, I first outline certain theories of aesthetic resonance and establish important concepts such as "empathy," "embodied simulation," and "body schema." Then, I describe some examples of experiences of embodied transformation in butoh and offer an interpretation of them in the light of the abovesaid theories. At the end of the article, I widen the scope and propose that embodied transformation in butoh is indeed a special case of a general potential for transformation inherent in the aesthetic experience per se. In that section, I draw on other thinkers, in particular John Dewey.

THEORIES OF AESTHETIC RESONANCE

The idea that our body resounds internally with what we behold in aesthetic experiences is central to the nineteenth-century tradition called *Einfühlungsästhetik*, or empathy aesthetics. The German

philosopher Robert Vischer coined the term *Einfühlung*, later translated into English as empathy, in his 1873 dissertation *On the Optical Sense of Form*, where he addresses the problem of how the beholder projects his ego into the object of visual aesthetic contemplation.[6] Vischer called this component of emotional projection in the aesthetic experience *Einfühlung*, literally "feeling-into." He built partly on the work of his father, Theodor Vischer, who had written about similar themes, as well as on the burgeoning science of neurology—he assumed that aesthetic empathy must be based in the neural anatomy of the beholder. An even more important source of inspiration, however, was a book about the interpretation of dreams by the German philosopher and psychologist Karl Albert Scherner, *Das Leben des Traum*s (*The Life of the Dream*), from 1861, a work that predates Sigmund Freud's famous *The Interpretation of Dreams* with almost four decades.[7] Scherner proposes that, in dreams, the person dreaming is often represented by objects from daily experience, especially in the form of a house. In Scherner's theory, Vischer found a model for processes of projection at work also in perception and imagination. In visual aesthetic experiences, he proposes, the entire body, not just the organ of the eye, is mobilized in such a way that the perceived object becomes an "appearance" of the beholder's self. Therefore, visual experiences can trigger other sensory modalities, in particular that of touch, and Vischer describes different variants of seeing in tactile terms, as "linear, whereby I define the contours with my fingertips, so to speak," or as "a mapping of the masses, whereby I run my hand, as it were, over the planes, convexities, and concavities of an object."[8] Moreover, visual stimuli also can trigger motor responses:

> I might imagine myself moving along the line of a range of hills guided by kinesthetic imagination [...] In the same way, fleeting clouds might carry me far away. [...] the forms appear to move, but only we move in the imagination.[9]

Hence, according to Vischer, aesthetic empathy engages our entire organism, not just one sensory modality. "[E]ach empathic sensation ultimately leads to a strengthening or a weakening of the general *vital sensation*."[10]

Vischer's theory influenced nineteenth-century scholars such as the Swiss art historian Heinrich Wölfflin. In his dissertation, *Prolegomena to a Psychology of Architecture* (1886), Wölfflin argues that the physical forms of buildings appear expressive to us only, because

we ourselves are physical beings who experience gravity and resistance in and through our bodies.

> We have carried loads and experienced pressure and counterpressure, we have collapsed to the ground when we no longer had the strength to resist the downward pull of our own bodies, and that is why we can appreciate the noble serenity of a column and understand the tendency of all matter to spread out formlessly on the ground.[11]

If we were purely visual beings, Wölfflin asserts, "we would always be denied an aesthetic judgment of the physical world."[12]

It is not necessary here to delve into Vischer's and Wölfflin's subprinciples of empathic resonance. Suffice it to note their general claim, that the whole human organism responds internally in experiences of aesthetic empathy. After a few decades, however, the popularity of empathy aesthetics dwindled, especially after the publication in 1908 of Wilhelm Worringer's *Abstraction and Empathy*, where Worringer links empathy exclusively to figurative representation, in contrast to Vischer's and Wölfflin's views.[13] As abstraction, not figuration, came to dominate twentieth century art, empathic identification, understood in Worringer's way, appeared outdated and modern art instead became associated to notions of estrangement, like Viktor Shklovsky's *ostranenie* and Bertolt Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*.[14]

In other circles, however, the theorization of an "inner body" continued. In a 1911 article about the effects of brain damage on sensory perception, British physicians Herbert Head and Gordon Holmes coined the term "schema" to denote an inner neural model of the body, a pre-reflective, wired-in map or blueprint of the body's structure and position, responsible for elemental aspects of embodiment such as proprioception.[15] Central to Head and Holmes was the contrast between the body schema and conscious body images: the schema, they assert, is not a visual image we can reflect on consciously. Maurice Merleau-Ponty picked up the term from Head and Holmes in his *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), but as Taylor Carman has pointed out, in Colin Smith's English translation of Merleau-Ponty's book, the term *schéma corporel* is rendered oftentimes as "body image," sometimes as "body schema."[16] This mistake obscures the distinction between the two terms and probably contributed to their subsequent inconsistent use, until philosopher

Shaun Gallagher, in a 1986 article, set out to clarify their meaning.[17] In a more recent publication, Gallagher defines them like this:

> *Body image*: a system of (sometimes conscious) perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs pertaining to one's own body.
>
> *Body schema*: a nonconscious system of processes that constantly regulate posture and movement – a system of motor-sensory capacities that function below the threshold of awareness, and without the necessity of perceptual monitoring.[18]

The concept of the body schema was later adopted into the neuroscientific theory of embodied simulation. In the 1990s, neuroscientists Vittorio Gallese and Giacomo Rizzolatti discovered what became popularly known as "mirror neurons," that is, neural circuits in the brain that activate when we observe someone else perform an action, partly in the same way as if we were performing that action ourselves.[19] In a word, the neurons "mirror" the observed action. Later, mirroring processes were found to activate also when we see someone else undergoing an emotion or sensation. Gallese states: "the very same nervous structures involved in the subjective experience of emotions and sensations are also active when such emotions and sensations are recognized in others."[20] The discovery of mirror neurons reignited the scholarly interest in empathy generally, and in several publications, Gallese pays tribute to the early theoreticians of *Einfühlungsästhetik*, among them Vischer and Wölfflin. Much like them, Gallese underscores that all mirroring mechanisms—for which he has coined the umbrella concept "embodied simulation"—engage the neural structure of the whole organism, and it is in this sense he employs the term body schema.[21]

Next, I will show how the theory of embodied simulation and the body schema offers an interpretation of the phenomenon of embodied transformation in butoh dance.

EMBODIMENT AND IMAGINATION IN BUTOH DANCE

Butoh is a Japanese avant-garde dance form created in the late 1950s by the dancer and choreographer Hijikata Tatsumi (1928–1986, born Yoneyama Kunio).[22] The first butoh performance, most chroniclers of the art form agree, was Hijikata's fifteen-minute experimental dance adaption of Japanese author Mishima Yukio's novel *Kinjiki* (*Forbidden Colors*, 1951), which was performed at a dance festival in Tokyo, on May 24, 1959. Documentation of Hijikata's performance

Fig. 1
Hijikata Tatsumi in *A Story of Smallpox (Hôsôtan)*, one of five performances in Hijikata's "Great Dance Mirror of Burnt Sacrifice —Performance to Commemorate the Second Unity of the School of the Dance of Utter Darkness—Twenty-seven Nights for Four Seasons," Oct. 25—Nov 20, 1972, at the Shinjuku Culture Art Theater, Tokyo. The picture is from Hijikata's solo scene *rai byou* (smallpox). Photographer: Ryozen Torii. Courtesy of Keio University Art Center / Butoh Laboratory, Japan.

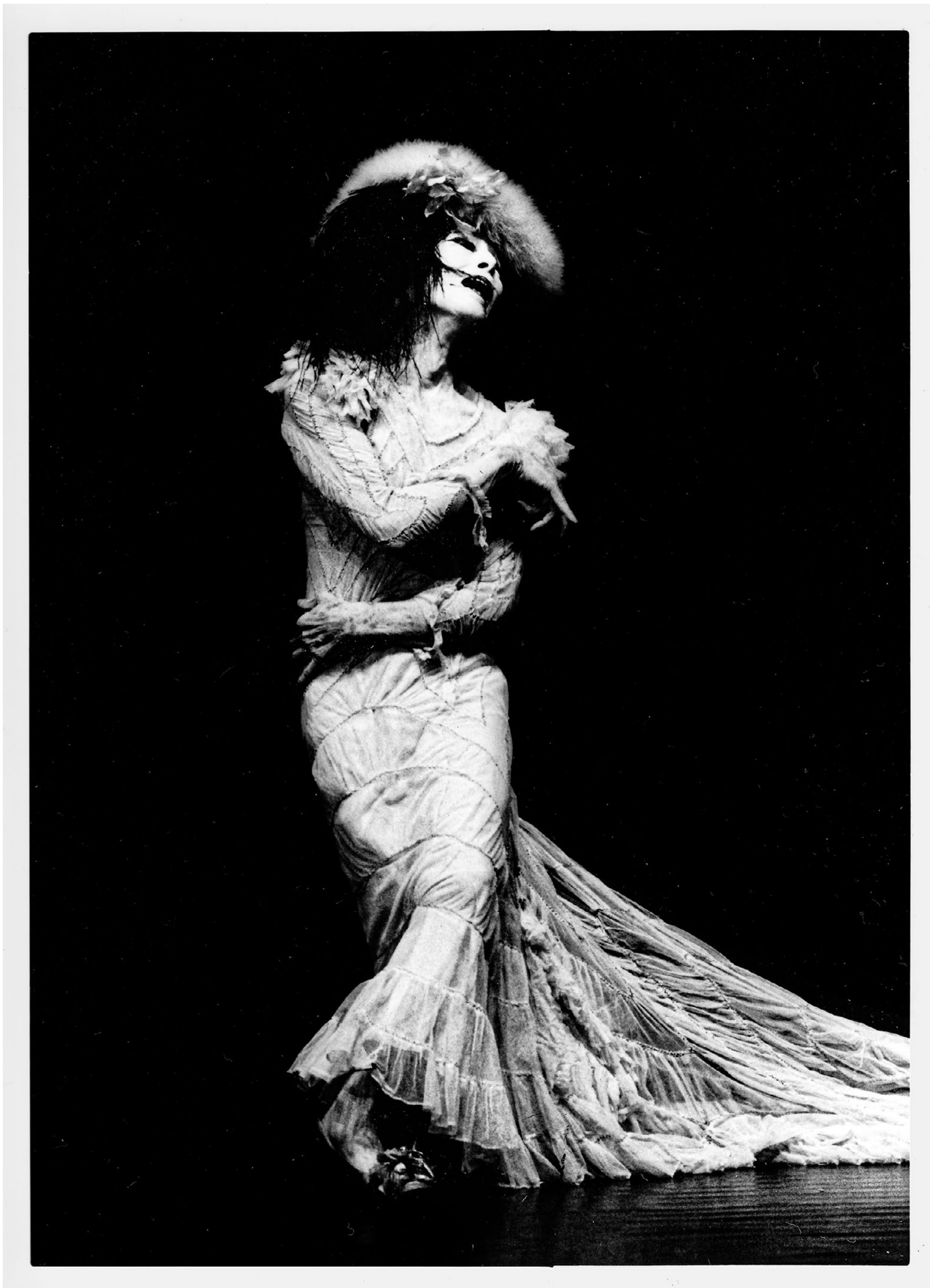

Fig. 2
Ohno Kazuo in the Japanese premiere of his performance *Flowers-Birds-Wind-Moon (Ka-Cho-Fu-Getsu)*, in August 1991, at the Ginza Saison Theater, Tokyo. The photo is from the second scene, "Is the Ghostly Horse Carriage a Messenger from Hades?" Photographer: Naoya Ikegami. Courtesy of NPO Dance Archive Network.

is sparse. Two dancers appeared on stage, Hijikata himself and Ohno Yoshito (1938–2020), son of the choreographer and dancer Ohno Kazuo (1906–2010), a friend of Hijikata and often regarded as a co-founder of butoh. The dance was carried out partly in darkness, without music, and included overtly homoerotic scenes and a choreography that challenged expectations on dance as graceful and rhythmic. When I interviewed Ohno Yoshito, almost sixty years after the event, he told me that he pondered, during rehearsals for *Kijnjiki*, "is this dance at all?"[23]

In the following two decades, butoh—or *ankoku butō*, "ballet of darkness," as Hijikata initially named his new dance form[24]—developed into an elaborate methodology. Certain visual characteristics emerged during this period that still recur in much butoh, such as minutely controlled micro-movements, a glacial pace, white body paint, and grotesque imagery. Butoh evolved along two main trajectories, one stemming from Hijikata, the other from Ohno Kazuo. (Fig. 1 and 2) In an oft-quoted formulation, Jean Viala, an early chronicler of butoh, labels Hijikata "the architect of butoh" because of his constant experimentation with method, and Ohno Kazuo "the soul of butoh" for his lyrical, improvisational approach.[25] The Swedish butoh artist SU-EN, whose work I will refer to below, says that Hijikata's butoh was "dark," and Ohno Kazuo's, "light."[26] In general, butoh is characterized by images of weakness, vulnerability, and the grotesque, and by earthly and chthonic motifs. Hijikata reportedly stated, "I would never jump or leave the ground. It is on the ground I dance."[27] His wife and fellow dancer Motofuji Akiko remarks that Hijikata grew up in a rural province, and throughout his career, the soil remained the foundation of his dance. "That is why we 'dance the connection' between the soles of our feet and the ground."[28]

Hijikata died from liver cancer in 1986. He never left Japan, but Ohno Kazuo and several second-generation ensembles toured abroad. As butoh spread internationally, Western dancers and choreographers began to go to Japan to study the new dance form. Among them was the Swedish dancer Susanna Åkerlund, who traveled to Japan in 1986 and studied for seven years under two of Hijikata's most renowned disciples, Shizune Tomoe and Ashikawa Yoko. When Åkerlund graduated, Ashikawa bestowed on her the butoh name SU-EN. In 1997, SU-EN started a Swedish butoh center in the small village of Almunge, outside Uppsala, which today attracts students from across the world. (Fig. 3). This article is informed partly by my fieldwork there and by interviews with SU-EN.

Fig. 3
SU-EN in her performance *Luscious*, 2009.
Photographer: Made Surya D. Courtesy by SU-EN Butoh Company.

Many butoh practitioners claim that butoh is not about the external appearance of the dance but about the dancer's internal transformation. Ohno Yoshito writes that transformation in butoh cannot be reduced to mere choreography: "Creating variations in movements and transfiguring oneself are not identical."[29] He recalls that Hijikata rarely instructed him on how to move his body, but instead suggested various images for him to interiorize. "Walk through autumn grass!", "Look at a swamp full of reeds in the distance. A bird is flying away!", "Feel a whiff of death!"[30] Through months of practice, these images would sink into Ohno Yoshito until they manifested in his bodily posture and movements. In order to grasp what the instruction "Feel a whiff of death!" really meant, he spent a long time in a graveyard, only to finally realize that there existed no such smell. He understood that a whiff of death was just "vapor being released from matter." His approach then shifted from trying to imitate an imagined shape to altering his entire being:

> Before becoming aware of this, I had danced by tracing the form I imagined as the smell of death. Yet, now thanks to this fresh awareness I could try to be a gas being released into the atmosphere.[31]

Butoh scholar Bruce Baird defines three components as critical in Hijikata's methodology: the notion of transformation or becoming, the idea that movement should arise from inside the body instead of being employed to it from outside, and thirdly, the use of imagery to shape movements and postures.[32] Those components are also combined in SU-EN's version of butoh.

SU-EN defines transformation in butoh, as the dancer becoming *butoh-tai*, the butoh body. In her book, *Butoh: Body and the World*, she describes this process as a journey away from an everyday bodily awareness to an alternative kind of embodiment that gradually takes over the dancer.

> The process towards a butoh body starts far from the private body and its personal desires. Butoh quality slowly creeps under the skin and takes command of the body and challenges all functions.[33]

According to SU-EN, the butoh body has a basic structure with a vertical gravity line that runs through what she refers to as "the emptiness of the butoh body." It can shift to the left or right. Several such

lines can coexist. They are traversed by currents of energy, upwards and downwards simultaneously, and can be subdivided into innumerable segments, with the energy moving in each segment independently.[34] Here we see a pattern that recurs in more evolved manifestations of the butoh body. An image is established–in this case, of a channel traversed by energy–which is then reiterated on different levels of scale.

The basic butoh body also has "erasing points" and "expanding points," which correspond to passive and active joints. The dancer's legs are disconnected from the torso as if by an "iron pipe." These traits, SU-EN explains, express a dialectic between form and formlessness.

> Form is dissolved to leave room for non-form. The form takes over again in an eternal, dynamic process. In this dynamic form and non-form space, an arm can start a new life as an arm, once it has been erased and has surrendered its desire to be an arm. A leg might take its first step when its intention to walk has been surrendered. The arm and leg might change identities.[35]

The basic butoh body can then be endowed with attributes or qualities, termed "body materials." They are passed on from teacher to student as verbal images which the student incorporates through training: "The butoh body is shaped by words, thrown against the body to embody them, to integrate their intention."[36] SU-EN's system includes some sixty or seventy body materials, whereof several originate from Hijikata and were passed on by Ashikawa. Others, SU-EN has created independently. Their names, like "Stone," "Dust," or "Rotting Process," indicate that they should be thought of not as abstractions but as distinct corporeal qualities. Here is SU-EN's script for the body material named "Devoured by Insects," originally conceived by Hijikata:

> an insect starts to eat into the body
>
> in through the fingertip and up through the arm
>
> creeps under the skin
>
> leaves emptiness in its wake
>
> another insect starts to feast on the body

in through the neck

creeps under the skin

a third insect feeds on the foot and up the inside of the leg

a fourth insect eats into the navel

a fifth chews away at the chest

the insects multiply to five hundred

eating the body's softer tissue

under the armpits, behind the elbows, between the legs

the insects gather strength, now five thousand

eating the body's even softer parts

inside the lips, the eyelids, the hair, between the fingers, toes

fifty thousand insects

eating the entire skin surface, covering the pores

the outline is erased

fifty thousand in the body, devouring the organs and intestines

all functions close down

fifty thousand squeeze out through the pores

becoming five hundred thousand

five hundred thousand eat the air around the body

all these to be devoured by other insects

and these in turn eaten by more

all eaten

the remains of the body

a thin outline[37]

Here, again, an image is established, in this case, of an insect penetrating the body, which is then reiterated on many levels of scale. Thus, the disintegration of the body's boundary and composition is imagined again and again, in each step as more far-reaching.

To become the butoh body, the dancer is also required to modify her attention. Ohno Kazuo writes that "it's impossible for me to dance if I continue to look at things in my habitual way."[38] SU-EN states that butoh students must learn a "particular kind of listening," in order to incorporate the teacher's words.[39] This can entail imagining oneself observed from the outside. Baird describes how Hijikata used to instruct his dancers to imagine being looked at from above or from all directions at once.[40] He also required them to perform movements as if under water or inside a stone, or while perceiving certain sounds, smells, or tastes, all of which would affect the character of movement.[41] They also imagined their nervous systems extending into space, beyond the actual reach of their bodies.[42]

The above shows that, in butoh, the dancer and her surroundings is thought to undergo transformation together. As in the body material "Devoured by Insects," the boundary between body and world is often blurred or erased. This process may start out from the body, as when SU-EN writes, "one pair of feet suddenly increases in number to thousands of pairs to occupy all available space simultaneously."[43] In other cases, the world encroaches upon the dancer, as in a drawing by SU-EN, where a concave shape exerts a pull on the dancer's body from behind. "World behind is calling," the caption reads.[44] (Fig. 4) The dancer's eyes can become gates for the world to enter through. "The eyes are windows, through which the big world looks inside."[45] Crucially, however, this blurring of the boundary between body and world never results in tensionless union. On the contrary, SU-EN stresses the critical role of "resistance" between body and world. Movement, she says, is born from resistance.

During my fieldwork at one of SU-EN's training camps for a performance titled *Voracious*, I was struck by how demanding the training was. Layer upon layer of verbal imagery was strung together into

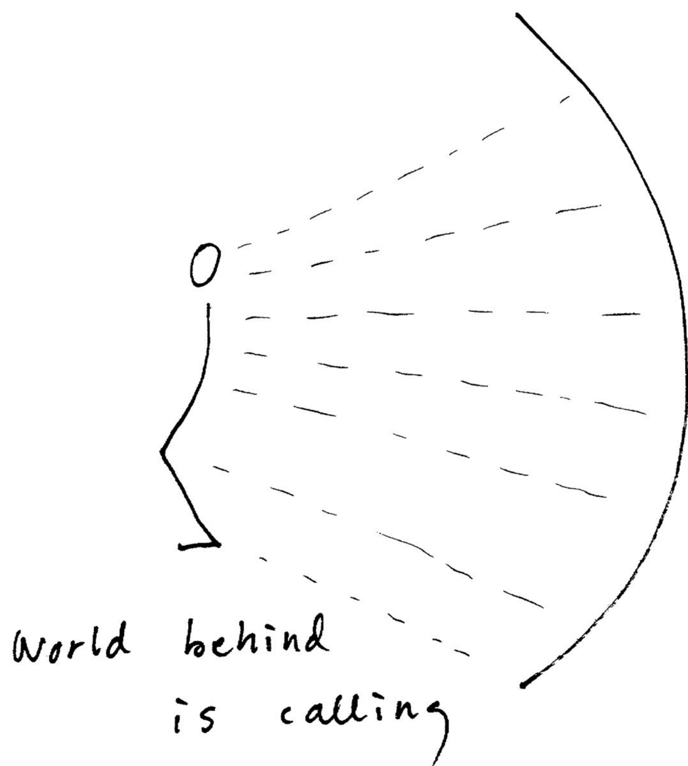

Fig. 4
“World behind is calling.” Drawing by SU-EN. From SU-EN, Gilles Kennedy and Maja Sandberg, *Butoh. Body and the world*. Stockholm: Rye förlag, 2003, p. 68.

elaborate sequences of movements and postures, in which each part and section of the body had to be moved separately, yet simultaneously, as if each was endowed with a life of its own. After a particularly taxing session, I asked SU-EN why the training had to be so intense. She replied that, "the dancers must not be allowed to slide into a lagoon of thinking about 'my training'. To become the butoh body, they must give up their private reasons for dancing."[46] The pressure of the training thus prevents the dancers from falling into mechanical routine. The body materials must not merely be copied as outer form, SU-EN emphasizes, but should be "reborn again and again in the student's/dancer's body. If there is no passion or fire, it is just empty shapes."[47]

All this goes to show that what I call embodied transformation in butoh is an intertwinement of embodiment and imagination. Shaping and holding an image for one's mind's eye and, through repetitive training, *in*-corporating it–taking and making it into one's body–is the inner path that leads to the outer manifestation of dance.

THE ROLE OF EMBODIED SIMULATION AND THE BODY SCHEMA IN BUTOH

Recall the distinction between body image and body schema: a body image is a (sometimes) conscious mental image of one's body, a body schema a pre-reflective model of the body's structure and position, underpinning an elemental sense of embodiment. In butoh training, I propose, there can be a transfer of "content"–of imagined body shapes and properties–from the level of the body image to that of the body schema, and this transfer is felt as experiences of embodied transformation. All the techniques described above start out as conscious imagery. Through the dancer's reiterative training, I suggest, this imagery gradually penetrates the level of the body schema, the seat of our most basic embodied awareness. Hence, the experience shifts from one of deliberate imagination to one of actual transformation of the body.

Two kinds of evidence support this interpretation. First, experiments have shown that imagining a bodily movement or posture can activate the same neural networks as if actually performing it. Imagination can thus trigger mirroring mechanisms just as external observation can. Gallese states, "visual and motor [mental] imagery do qualify as further forms of embodied simulation."[48] Importantly, imagining a scene before one's mind's eye may set in motion neural processes of simulation, even if that scene cannot exist in the

external world. In fact, Gallese proposes that imagination, for this very reason, can provide a wider range of simulation than external observation, since imagination is not constrained by the laws of physical reality.[49]

Secondly, research indicates that content can indeed migrate between the levels of the body image and the body schema. Already Head and Holmes asserted that the body schema is not static but dynamic and malleable, a view later confirmed by Gallagher and Michael Arbib.[50] Victor Pitron and Frédérique Vignemont propose that body image and body schema evolve in relation and can influence each other under certain circumstances.[51] The body schema is thought to begin to develop already in the prenatal phase and therefore to precede the formation of conscious body images. However, Pitron, Adrian Alsmith, and Vignemont propose that if a significant incongruence occurs between the two levels, the body schema can recalibrate in order to resolve the incongruence.[52]

This ability of the body schema to recalibrate under the pressure of incongruence, I propose, is triggered in butoh training. The mental imagery employed in butoh is typically at odds with the dancer's everyday sense of her body, as demonstrated in the quoted examples. Hence, an incongruence emerges between the levels of body image and body schema. This also speaks to SU-EN's emphasis on the critical role of resistance between body and world, as that from which the dance is born. The latter point is illuminated by the fact that the body schema is intimately linked to the body's potential for interaction with its surroundings. Gallese and Sinigaglia assert that the body schema is related to peri-personal space, that is, the space we perceive as being within our physical reach. On that point, they quote Merleau-Ponty, who writes, thanks to the body schema, "my body appears to me as an attitude directed towards a certain existing or possible task. [The body schema's] spatiality is […] a spatiality of situation."[53]

In other words, the body schema ought not to be thought of as a matrix of the body as a static, free-standing entity, but as always already dependent on and making possible the body's interaction with the world. This resonates with the notion in butoh that the dancer and her surroundings undergo transformation together and that the boundary between them is blurred or dissolved. Indeed, many butoh exercises, where the body is imagined to extend beyond its actual reach or to fill up all available space, or oppositely, when

the world is imagined to encroach on or flood the body, seem to transform the entire world into a peri-personal space, that is, a space that stands in relation with the dancer's motility.[54]

In sum, I propose that embodied transformation in butoh can be understood as a transfer of content from the level of the body image to the level of the body schema, and in that process, the latter recalibrates in response to the pressure of incongruence. I take SU-EN's statement, quoted earlier, as a summation of this process: "Butoh quality slowly creeps under the skin and takes command of the body and challenges all functions."[55]

TRANSFORMATION IN THE AESTHETIC

Until this point, this article has focused on embodiment in a strict sense, linking experiences of embodied transformation, as recounted by butoh practitioners, to theories that discuss aesthetic resonance in terms of neural processes involving embodied simulation and the body schema. But the notion that we undergo some sort of inner change in and through our aesthetic experiences, and that this change entails a deeper felt connection to what we behold, is not limited to the particular theoretical context discussed so far. Similar ideas, less explicitly linked to embodiment, recur throughout the history of modern aesthetic thought, as discussed recently by Harri Mäcklin.[56] For some thinkers, the transformation of selfhood felt in aesthetic experiences is understood to reach beyond the specific object under contemplation and encompass the entire surround. Iris Murdoch, for instance, says about the transformative process she calls "unselfing," which she links to the aesthetic, that it "makes the world become 'altogether different' and wax and wane as a *whole*."[57] In a similar vein, Elaine Scarry writes that sensations of beauty can be like "small tears in the surface of the world that pull us through to some vaster space [...so that] we find we are standing in a different relation to the world than we were a moment before."[58] Byung-Chul Han remarks about Scarry's words: "In the face of beauty, the subject takes a side (*lateral*) position; it steps aside instead of pushing to the fore."[59] Martin Seel, finally, says that our aesthetic sensibility gives us "the capacity for the unregulated balancing and re-balancing of our trust and mistrust in the world."[60]

Much like the butoh artists quoted above, these thinkers hold that, in the aesthetic experience, our relation to the world changes holistically, in one fell sweep, but they don't link this change explicitly to questions of embodiment. (All of them relate this facet of the

aesthetic experience to a discussion about ethics, a topic I must put aside in this article.) Embodiment, however, is not completely absent from their reasoning. The circumstance that aesthetic experiences come to us through our sensory modalities suffices to posit the body as their point of departure, although they articulate this to a varying extent. Among twentieth century aesthetic philosophers, it might be John Dewey, in his seminal volume *Art as Experience* from 1934, who most explicitly grounds the expansive character of the aesthetic experience in our existential conditions as corporeal beings. It is a mistake, Dewey argues, to say that the human organism begins and ends with the epidermis, the outermost layer of our skin. Things that are not ourselves, water, oxygen, nourishment, constantly pass through us. The rhythms of the body are inextricably interwoven with its surroundings. Our breath and heartbeat, being awake and asleep, metabolic processes, all sway with the cycles of day and night, the weather and the seasons, sowing and harvest, and with the birth and passing of innumerable organisms within and outside us. Rhythm creates contrast, the prerequisite of any experience, and thus, Dewey contends, it is from our body's entwinement with the world that our aesthetic experiences originate.

In everyday life, Dewey continues, objects appear to us separate and bounded because our instrumental interest in them isolates them from their surroundings. But any experience unfolds against an indefinite total setting, an undefined "background," which we can only sense intuitively. Our imagination may call this intuited whole the universe but there is really no proper name to designate it. In our everyday dealings with things, this background stays passive or dormant, but in our aesthetic experiences, it comes to the fore, makes itself felt. Not as one more bounded object of focused attention but as a pervasive presence, a unity more profound than mere physical assemblage, which encompasses and permeates all. In such moments, Dewey writes,

> [w]e are, as it were, introduced into a world beyond this world which is nevertheless the deeper reality of the world in which we live in our ordinary experiences. We are carried out beyond ourselves to find ourselves. [---]. This whole is then felt as an expansion of ourselves.[61]

Dewey's characterization of the aesthetic experience finds an echo in the accounts by butoh dancers of transforming in and through the butoh training. In both cases, we encounter a metamorphosis in

which body and surround sway in tandem. In my interpretation, this indicates that embodied transformation in butoh, for all the art-form's specialized training techniques, can be seen as a particular case of a potential for transformative experiences inherent in the aesthetic at large. Another point is that Dewey acknowledges the mystical, ineffable quality imbuing intense aesthetic experiences. In the same vein, many butoh artists point to devotion, or states resembling devotion, as an important facet of the art form. Ohno Kazuo, a converted Christian, declared that his every movement was a prayer.[62] This is not to say that transformation in butoh, or in aesthetic experiences generally, is tantamount to religious conversion. It is merely to recognize that some facets of the experiences we are prone to classify as "aesthetic" or "spiritual" resound with each other.[63]

Perhaps, in butoh, these aspects of union and connection are one side of the coin, the reverse side of which, then, is friction and incongruence. Hijikata stated that, to be able to dance, "I demand a sense of crisis."[64] SU-EN, as mentioned above, insists on the resistance between *butoh-tai* and the world as the source of transformation, the well from which the dance springs forth. Here I have proposed an interpretation that links the experiences of embodied transformation to neural processes of embodied simulation, and I have pointed to the central role of the imagination in these experiences. In both cases, it's about an inner metamorphosis, the word "inner", however, signifying different things depending on if it is seen from the perspective of the dancer or of empirical aesthetics. If interpretation means carrying meaning between different positions of observation and conceptualization without subjugating one to the other, then, in the best of worlds, a more nuanced understanding might spring forth. If so, it will, so to speak, be found in translation.

Let me close with a quote from Ohno Kazuo, who, a hundred years old, performed on stage sitting in a wheelchair, dancing with his hands, arms, and head. In the passage below, he reinterprets (without *ex-plaining*) the old metaphor of the butterfly emerging from its cocoon, and in doing so, he captures in a single image the topics addressed in this article–embodiment, resistance, and inner transformation.

In performance, our capacity to transform ourselves is truly critical. Note how a butterfly's compressed wings are extremely brittle on first emerging from the chrysalis. Moreover, nature has created a butterfly in such a way that it's physically impossible for it to take to the air immediately: it must wait some time before it is capable of flight. I wonder how it feels on its first contact with the external world, during those agonizing moments in which it finds itself unable to expand its wings to their full breadth and fly away? How does it physically respond? Does it ponder over how it should open its wings? No, how could it? There's no way I can explain what's going on inside its body. Yet those precarious moments, that short period in which a butterfly is completely helpless, is pure dance.[65]

1 Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, *The Primacy of Movement*, expanded 2nd edition. (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing, 2011).
2 An historical account of the exchange of these scholarly approaches is beyond the scope of this article. For such an account in relation to dance, and in accord with a reviewer of this article, I recommend Susan Leigh Foster, *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance*. (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2011).
3 Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, "Movement and Mirror Neurons: A Challenging and Choice Conversation," *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 11 (2012): 385–401.
4 Sheets-Johnstone targets in particular an article co-written by Gallese and the art historian David Freedberg where they propose that our response to visual art is based on neural mirroring mechanisms. See David Freedberg and Vittorio Gallese, "Motion, Emotion, and Empathy in Aesthetic Experience," *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 11, no. 5 (2007): 197–203.
5 David Summers, "Real Metaphor: Towards a Redefinition of the 'Conceptual' Image," in *Visual Theory*, ed. Norman Bryson, Ann Holly, and Keith Moxey, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), 255 (231–259).
6 Robert Vischer, *On the Optical Sense of Form: A Contribution to Aesthetics*, trans. Harry Francis Mallgrave and Eleftherios Ikonomou, in *Empathy, Form, and Space: Problems in German Aesthetics, 1873–1893*, ed. Harry F. Mallgrave (Santa Monica: Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1994), 89–123. Orginally published as *Über das optische Formgefühl: Ein Beitrag zur Aesthetik* (Leipzig: Hermann Credner, 1873).
7 Karl Albert Scherner, *Das Leben des Traums* (Berlin: Verlag von Heinrich Schindler, 1861); Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams. The Complete and Definitive Text*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 1955; originally published as *Die Traumdeutung* (Leipzig & Vienna: Franz Deuticke, 1899).
8 Vischer, *On the Optical Sense of Form*, 94.
9 Vischer, *On the Optical Sense of Form*, 101.
10 Vischer, *On the Optical Sense of Form*, 99. Emphasis in original.
11 Heinrich Wölfflin, *Prolegomena to a Psychology of Architecture*, trans. Harry Francis Mallgrave and Eleftherios Ikonomou, in *Empathy, Form, and Space. Problems in German Aesthetics, 1873–1893*, ed. Harry F. Mallgrave, (Santa Monica: Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1994), 151 (149–192) originally published as *Prolegomena zu einer Psychologie der Architektur* (Munich: Kgl. Hof & Universitäts-Buchdruckerei von Dr. C. Wolf & Sohn, 1886).
12 Wölfflin, *Prolegomena to a Psychology of Architecture*, 151.
13 Vilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy. A Contribution to the Psychology of Style*, trans. Michael Bullock (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Inc., 1997) originally published as *Abstraktion und Einfühlung* (Munich: R. Piper, 1908).
14 For more on this topic, see Robin Curtis, "An Introduction to *Einfühlung*," *Art in Translation* 6, no. 4 (2014): 353–376; and Juliet Koss, "On the Limits of Empathy," *Art Bulletin*, 88, no. 1 (2006): 139–157.
15 Henry Head and Gordon Holmes, "Sensory Disturbances from Cerebral Lesions," *Brain* 34, no. 1–2 (1911): 102–254.
16 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1962) originally published as *Phénomènologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945); Taylor Carman, "The Body in Husserl and Merleau-Ponty," *Philosophical Topics* 27, no. 2 (1999): 218 (205–226).
17 Shaun Gallagher, "Body Image and Body Schema: A Conceptual Clarification," *The Journal of Mind and Behavior* 7, no. 4 (1986): 541–554.
18 Shaun Gallagher, "Dynamic Models of Body Schematic Processes," in *Body Image and Body Schema: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Body*, eds. Helena De Preester and Veroniek Knockaert (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing, 2005), 234 (233–250); see also Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi, *The Phenomenological Mind* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2012), 164–165; and Valentina Cuccio, "Body Schema and Body Image in Metaphorical Cognition," in *Metaphor. Embodied Cognition and Discourse*, ed. Beate Hampe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 82–98.
19 See Vittorio Gallese, Luciano Fadiga, Leonardo Fogassi, and Giacomo Rizzolatti, "Action Recognition in the Premotor Cortex," *Brain* 119 (1996): 593–609; and Giacomo Rizzolatti, Luciano Fadiga, Vittorio Gallese and Leonardo Fogassi, "Premotor Cortex and the Recognition of Motor Actions," *Cognitive Brain Research* 3 (1996): 131–141; see also Vittorio Gallese, Christian Keysers and Giacomo Rizzolatti, "A Unifying View of the Basis of Social Cognition," *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 8 (2004): 396–403.
20 Vittorio Gallese, "Embodied Simulation. Its Bearing on Aesthetic Experience and the Dialogue Between Neuroscience and the Humanities," *Gestalt Theory* 41, no. 2 (2019): 115 (113–128).
21 Vittorio Gallese: "Neurons are not epistemic agents. The only things neurons 'know' about the world are the ions constantly flowing through their membranes. In contrast, mentalization and intersubjectivity are personal-level properties of individuals. We could tentatively define individuals as interconnected brain-body systems interacting in situated ways with a specific environment—our *Umwelt*—inhabited by other brain-body systems." See Vittorio Gallese, "The Two Sides of Mimesis: Mimetic Theory, Embodied Simulation, and Social Identification," in *Mimesis and Science. Empirical Research on Imitation and the Mimetic Theory of Culture and Religion*, ed. Scott R. Garrels (East Lansing: Michigan University Press, 2011), 92 (87–108).
22 In this article, Japanese names have the surname first, following the Japanese policy since 2019.
23 Ohno Yoshito, interview with the author, Kamihoshikawa, January 12, 2017.

24 Butoh translates to “dance step.” The word *butō* – composed of Chinese characters for “dance” and “stomp” – usually suggests Western dance styles, e.g., waltz and ballet. See Bruce Baird and Rosemary Candelario, “Introduction. Dance Experience, Dance of Darkness, Global Butoh: The Evolution of a New Dance Form,” in *The Routledge Companion to Butoh Performance*, eds. Bruce Baird and Rosemary Candelario (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2019), Kindle Locations 1122–1129 (1050–1666).
25 Jean Viala and Nourit Masson-Sekine, *Butoh: Shades of Darkness* (Tokyo: Shufunotomo Co., Ltd., 1988), 60, 20.
26 SU-EN, interview with the author, Almunge, July 19, 2016.
27 Hijikata Tatsumi, cited in Pao-Yi Liao, *An Inquiry into the Creative Process with Reference to the Implications of Eastern and Western Significances*, PhD diss. (London: Laban City University, 2006), 48n2.
28 Eric Prideau, “Akiko Motofuji: In Step with Beauty, Life and Death,” interview with Akiko Motofuji, *The Japan Times*, Jun 8, 2003, https://www.japantimes.co.jp/community/2003/06/08/general/in-step-with-beauty-life-and-death/.
29 Ohno Yoshito, *Butoh: A Way of Life* (Tokyo: Canta, 2015), 92.
30 Ohno Yoshito, interview with the author, Kamihoshikawa, January 12, 2017. The same process is described slightly differently in Yoshito, *Butoh: A Way of Life*, 84.
31 Ohno Yoshito, *Butoh: A Way of Life*, 84–85.
32 Bruce Baird, *Hijikata Tatsumi and Butoh. Dancing in a Pool of Gray Grits* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 159–160.
33 SU-EN, Gilles Kennedy and Maja Sandberg, *Butoh. Body and the World* (Stockholm: Rye Förlag, 2003), 70.
34 SU-EN, interview with the author, Almunge, July 23, 2016.
35 SU-EN, Kennedy and Sandberg, *Butoh. Body and the world*, 74.
36 SU-EN, Kennedy and Sandberg, *Butoh. Body and the world*, 71.
37 SU-EN, Kennedy and Sandberg, *Butoh. Body and the world*, 79.
38 Ohno Kazuo and Ohno Yoshito, *Kazuo Ohno's World from Without and Within* (Middletown, US: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 24.
39 SU-EN, interview with the author, Almunge, July 23, 2016.
40 Baird, *Hijikata Tatsumi and Butoh. Dancing in a Pool of Gray Grits*, 165.
41 Baird, *Hijikata Tatsumi and Butoh. Dancing in a Pool of Gray Grits*, 166; Baird and Candelario, 2019, Kindle Location 1156.
42 Baird, *Hijikata Tatsumi and Butoh. Dancing in a Pool of Gray Grits*, 167; Baird and Candelario, 2019, Kindle Location 1150.
43 SU-EN, Kennedy and Sandberg, *Butoh. Body and the World*, 72.
44 SU-EN, Kennedy and Sandberg, *Butoh. Body and the World*, 68.
45 SU-EN, interview with the author, Almunge, July 23, 2016.
46 SU-EN, interview with the author, Almunge, July 23, 2016.
47 SU-EN, “Light as Dust, Hard as Steel, Fluid as Snake Saliva: The Butoh Body of Ashikawa Yoko,” in Baird and Candelario. eds., *The Routledge Companion to Butoh Performance*, Kindle Locations 6942–6943 (6748–7005).
48 Gallese, “Embodied Simulation,” 116.
49 Vittorio Gallese, “Visions of the Body: Embodied Simulation and Aesthetic Experience,” *Aisthesis. Pratiche, Linguaggi E Saperi dell'estetico* 10, no. 1 (2017): 47 (41–50).
50 Shaun Gallagher and Michael Arbib, “The Minds, Machines, and Brains of a Passionate Scientist. An Interview with Michael Arbib,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 11, no. 12 (2004): 55–56 (50–67). See also Gallagher, ”Dynamic Models of Body Schematic Processes,” 245.
51 Victor Pitron and Frédérique de Vignemont, “Beyond Di erences Between the Body Schema and the Body Image: Insights from Body Hallucinations”, *Consciousness and Cognition* 53 (2017): 115–121.
52 Victor Pitron, Adrian Alsmith, and Frédérique de Vignemont, “How Do the Body Image and the Body Schema Interact?” *Consciousness and Cognition* 65 (2018): 353, 356 (352–358).
53 Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 100, quoted in Gallese and Sinigaglia, “The Bodily Self as Power for Action,” *Neuropsychologia* 48 (2010), 748.
54 An example: during one of my interviews with Ohno Yoshito, he instructed me to stretch out my arm towards the wall of the studio and imagine that it continued through the wall and beyond it, all the way to the other side of the globe, where the hand would wave and gently say, “Hello Sweden, how are you?”
55 SU-EN, Kennedy and Sandberg, *Butoh. Body and the World*, 70.
56 Harry Mäcklin, “Aesthetic Self-Forgetfulness,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 61, no. 4 (October 2021): 527–541.
57 Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 54. Emphasis in original.
58 Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton University Press, 1999), 111–12.
59 Byung-Chul Han, *Saving* Beauty, trans. Daniel Steuer (Cambridge, UK, and Medford, USA: Polity Press, 2018), 61.
60 Martin Seel, “Active Passivity: On the Aesthetic Variant of Freedom,” *Estetika: The Central European Journal of Aesthetics* LI/VII, no. 2 (2014): 277 (269–81).
61 John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Perigee Books, 1934), 195.
62 Ohno Yoshito, interview with the author, Kamihoshikawa, March 20, 2018.

63 Some scholars trace an influence in butoh from the Zen Buddhist doctrine of non-duality and the concept of *ma*, linked to stillness and emptiness. See Sondra Fraleigh, *Butoh. Metamorphic Dance and Global Alchemy* (Urbana, Chicago and Springfield: University of Chicago Press, 2010), passim. Others point out that butoh's embrace of the grotesque and violent is far from the serenity associated with *ma*. See Judith Hamera, "Silence That Reflects: Butoh, Ma, and a Crosscultural Gaze," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 10 (1990): 53–60. In one of his writings, Hijikata states that butoh has nothing to do with "the performing arts of shrines and temples." Hijikata Tatsumi, "Wind Daruma," *The Drama Review* 44, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 74 (71–81). SU-EN asserts, "Butoh is not Zen." SU-EN, interview with the author, Almunge, July 23, 2016.

64 Senda Akihiko, "Fragments of Glass. A Conversation between Hijikata Tatsumi and Suzuki Tadashi," *The Drama Review* 44, no. 1 (2000): 64 (62–70).

65 Ohno Kazuo and Ohno Yoshito, *Kazuo Ohno's World from Without and Within* (New York: Aperture, 2004), 285–86.