

Published in the magazine Heterogenesis June - 99

Translation from Swedish by Line Berg and Rachel Sweeney Oct -00

© Susanna Åkerlund/SU-EN

Butoh - the Living Body

Thoughts born out of an artistic activity - a way of perceiving the body and the creation of art.

Butoh places the body in the center. The body is not looked upon as a tool for expressing emotions or opinions but the body is the expression. It is a body that researches the possibilities and the limits. The body is conceived as part of a world where everything has a value and a place. Man is placed side by side with the animals, plants and minerals. The body is placed side by side with the soul and the thought. Everything is integrated in a dynamic balance. Butoh is a living artform that is defined and developed differently in every practitioner. It is affected by changes in the world and in the consciousness of man.

In our work we talk about butoh body. This involves a state of being rather than an individual or personal body shape. The butoh body is defined by the speed of life. In all forms of life and being, change occurs according to the necessary speed. Nothing is ever slow; speed is a condensed process. Where the thought does not reach the body takes over. The art of butoh seeks to approach the essence of life without intellectual interpretation. The butoh body is an extended body, dwelling in a reality which is not fixed. The butoh body makes the invisible visible and thereby recreates reality.

The process towards a butoh body starts far away from the personal body and its personal desires. The impulses come from outside and move inwards. 'Butoh quality' slowly creeps in under the skin and takes over the body to challenge all previous functions. The dancer gives herself up as a social and cultural being so as to fully investigate the forces of life and nature. The dance is moulded like a stone that is formed by water. To work with the body is also to challenge habits. We are part of the social and cultural habits of society as well as our own personal habits. In seeking the butoh body, 'a new body', these habits need to be addressed. Can we ever be free from our habits? Who is free of culture? Who is free from herself? These questions will form a base from where to collect strength. We create the future here and now.

Butoh methodology is mediated through poetic imagery rather than logical explanations. The method encompasses very concrete and demanding physical exercises. The dance training in itself can appear extremely enduring for someone who is not sufficiently motivated. Patience, courage and endurance are continually put to the test. Some kind of deconstruction process is initiated in the dancer's body which at the same time is a construction process. The whole circle needs to be completed before the results can be clear and comprehensive. The poetic and philosophical side of Butoh can also inspire and penetrate into other artforms and lifestyles and in this way develop into other forms than dance.

Body Poetry 1

my eyes are lakes

*changing color by
the color of the sky*

*my eyes are lakes
lakes without bottom
darkness is calling*

*my eyes are lakes
no longer looking at the world
the world is looking at me*

my eyes are the world

In the newborn butoh body form is investigated, which is inevitably connected with non-form. In this dynamic field of tension between form and non-form the force which becomes the dance will appear. The body is transformed into different living materials - smearing mud, fragrance from a flower, a cackling chicken, tree roots twisting down into the ground or a grain of dust. In the butoh body these materials are living in us and with us. In living matter the principles which initiate movement are carefully studied. The organic principles of nature are of prime importance to the study - both the landscape which surrounds us and that which is inside of us. All living matter follows certain principles, everything changes, everything dies and is born again. The principles and the materials are studied in detail, scientifically even, so as not to become just a vague idea. How are trees growing? What do things look like in darkness? How does gravity affect the bodies? How does a grain of dust affect time?

The dancer recreates reality in the body and in the space around the body. When the border between form and non-form, between body and space is erased a visual embodiment of the essence appears. The change is complete. Transformation is achieved. Form is destroyed to leave room for non-form. Then form takes over again in an eternal dynamic process. The body is destroyed time and time again to rise anew, in a new form.

The body cherishes the principle of constant change. Nothing is permanent in form or substance, nothing is fixed. Our understanding and conception about life and the world has to be in symbiosis with this change and therefore constantly challenged. When the principle of change is alive, there is no void anymore and everything is part of the process. Body, time and space are alive. The daily life of the butoh artist demands a constant challenge to surprise oneself.

Body Poetry 2

zuru-zuru-zuru

*touch your ear
feel the uneven parts
like mountains and valleys
do I dare to enter?*

do I dare to go to unknown places?

zuru-zuru-zuru

*my body starts to look like an ear
rounded, no sharp edges
I fall into the auditory canal
slipping, falling
it's dark inside
slippery, damp, with soft hairs*

zuru-zuru-zuru

*deep inside the body there is a ball room
all the intestines and organs
are there- guests of honour
I say hello to them all
slippery, slimy all in good shape
slippery, slimy like an organ should be*

zuru-zuru-zuru

*I forgot the purpose of my visit
but I quite like it here
it's warm and wet and dark
and the organs have chosen me to be their beauty queen
their slippery slimy beauty queen*

Comment: zuru-zuru-zuru
sounds like something slimy in Japanese

SU-ENs butoh performances are created with considerable preparations and choreographic research. The choreographed parts contain elements of improvisation. Form is again juxtaposed with non-form to seek the parts that cannot be calculated or controlled. What happens in the room in this particular situation and with this particular audience? With this particular spotlight? No performance can be considered completed but is systematically revised so that the dancer will not stagnate in some kind of empty professionalism. The reality for the majority of Butoh artists (with the exception of a few world famous butoh companies) is that very few opportunities are given to perform each production. Thus, when the works are performed again the situation, time and space are new and therefore completely new frames are created.

Meeting the audience is also part of the creative process. Here everything is pushed to the edge. The ultimate aim of the butoh dance is to communicate, touch, confront and address life in all its aspects. The meeting between the audience and the dancer's body is a joint effort where we can

question our own existence. Butoh dance does not rely on plot or narrative. It deals with existence. It should affect the spectator like the forces of nature. We cannot ignore the rain or a power cut after a stroke of lightning. The spectator is urged to look through the butoh body and even further - beyond - to reveal the most challenging of all - herself. The dancer's relation to the audience is equivalent to her relation to the world. Here the butoh artist can choose the direction of this relation - provocative or subtle. As a butoh artist I have a strong need to speak to the world, to communicate and share with other people and a wish to recycle the life I have been given.

Essentially, Butoh is a subversive activity. By recapturing the power of the body, responsibility is resumed to the individual. By restoring the living power back to the body some of the structures of society are also challenged. We are free to choose how to live. We can challenge our habits and go beyond them. We can create a better world and not expect that someone else will do it for us. By sharing our bodies with other existences, other beings and other people, we can address the basic values in life - respect and responsibility. By cherishing the living matter, the empty materialistic attitudes which dominate structures of society today are challenged.

Body Poetry 3

body exists in between

in between front and back

in between future and past

in between form and unform

in between darkness and light

in between joy and grief

in between heaven and earth

becoming dimensions

I walk

The Body Poetry are freely developed texts
from the teachings of Yoko Ashikawa

Susanna Åkerlund, CV

Born in Uppsala, Sweden, 1966 - Various theaterstudies - Went to Japan first time 1986 - Between 1988-1994 student and collaborator with Tomoe Shizune och Yoko Ashikawa in the group Tomoe Shizune & Hakutobo, Tokyo - 1992 takes the name of SU-EN and establishes SU-EN Butoh Company as an affiliated company to Tomoe Shizune & Hakutobo - 1994 SU-EN moves back to Sweden with her activity - SU-EN choreographs, dances and teaches according to the Ashikawa/Shizune method and develops the work towards a nordic butoh body: SU-EN butoh method.

SU-EN is based in Haglund Skola, a former village school in a forest in the northeast of Uppland. SU-EN tours extensively throughout Sweden and internationally.