

## MISREADING PHOTOGRAPHY – DESCRIBING THE PHOTOGRAPHER’S EXPERIENCE AS A PERFORMANCE

Abstract: This paper presents the study of the photographer’s experience during an act of photographing Butoh dance. It proposes to consider this experience as an ‘inner’ performance and provides its detailed description as an alternative to the image captured by the camera.

Butoh dance has been widely photographed since its beginnings in 1959. However, studies of the relationship between dancers and photographers have been largely absent in academic research so far. Many Butoh photographers have suggested that they feel as if they were part of the dance when confronting dancers with a camera. Photo albums have been published giving evidence of this kind of ‘duet’. This paper questions photographs as a record of the photographer’s experience and argues that there is a distinction between the content of a photograph and the act, which produces it. It suggests that it is appropriate to see the photographer’s experience during Butoh photography as a performance itself and proposes various tools for an exploration of this relationship.

This paper presents a first person account of the experience of photographing Butoh. It looks specifically at a photography project with Japanese Butoh dancers that I undertook in London in 2007. The description of my experience is gathered through an explication interview, which utilises approaches from Psycho-phenomenology and Consciousness studies, and Neuro-linguistic Programming. This approach helps to underpin the characteristics of the ‘inner’ performance and aims to represent an innovation in the field of performing arts photography.

This paper presents the study of the photographer’s experience during an act of photographing Butoh dance. It proposes to consider this experience as an ‘inner’ performance and provides its detailed description as an alternative to the image captured by the camera.

Butoh is a contemporary art form, which emerged in Japan in 1959 from juxtaposition of two individualities: Kazuo Ohno (now 102 years old<sup>\*</sup>) and Tatsumi Hijikata (died in 1986 at the age of 58). The dance has been widely photographed since its beginnings. It has attracted photographers with its strong visual aesthetics and the physical appearance of dancers’ well-trained bodies. The dancers welcomed the collaboration with photographers, which resulted in creation of many Butoh photographic albums. There is an interesting statement reappearing in many Butoh photographers’ testimonies saying that the act of taking pictures places them closer to the dance. They often claim that they are themselves part of the Butoh dance. The photographers’ creative involvement has been recognised and appreciated by Kazuo Ohno for many years. He often collaborated with a French photographer Nourit

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<sup>\*</sup> Kazuo Ohno died in 2010.

Masson-Sekine. He would invite her to take photographs during the rehearsals in his studio, allowing the clicking sound of the camera become his guide to whether the inner focus in his dance was sustained. Masson-Sekine is perhaps the photographer who most strongly argues that the act of photographing Butoh dance is a performance in itself. She wrote:

Photographing Butoh involves perceiving the unperceived, feeling the emotional chasms locked within a body (...). The interaction often takes the form of a chase, at times frontal, at times circular; the photographer becomes the hunter chasing a prey that lies outside of his field of vision; he himself becomes part of the dance by hunting illusions, combating the flux of time and seeking to halt its flow towards death (Viala and Masson-Sekine, 1988, p 8).

Although the photographer's act has been recognised as creative, dynamic and engaging with the dancers in a different way to that of other audience members, no description of the photographer's performative act has been provided so far. As a Butoh researcher and photographic practitioner, I explore that route and propose a description of the photographer's experience during an act of photographic Butoh dance.

It will be helpful to look briefly at first at the specific nature of Butoh dance in order to understand what the photographers may have in mind when they say they also do perform Butoh when they take pictures.

Butoh dance is not merely a visual event that is being shown to the public but an event that engages audience in the experience "involving body and mind", as Butoh researcher Nanako Kurihara noticed (Kurihara, 1997, p 42). This experience can only take place in the present time and is communicated from body to body. Butoh researcher and a dancer, Toshikaru Kasai suggests that Butoh is different than other types of dance because it may be performed without physically apparent movements – Butoh dancer can appear as standing still whilst he “shifts the air in the right lung to the left via his/her trachea with indiscernible bodily movements” (Kasai, 2000). It is perhaps for this reason that photographing Butoh is different than photographing any other dance. The internal or mental movements do not manifest themselves in visually perceived movements but are present within the audience (and that includes a photographer too) and dancer interaction based largely on the bodily sense. Hence it

might also be interesting to look at photographing in this way where a photographer perceives the dance via the sensorial body experience. His perception is not a passive reaction to the dance but an active and creative process; it is the 'inner' performance, in the same token as a Butoh dancer performs his 'inner' unseen dance. The photographer's act based on the interaction between himself and a dancer, mediated by a camera, creates a new ontological event. This type of performance, which is invisible as such, may be explored as a cognitive body experience.

The first-person methodologies offer great potential for providing a detailed description of the structure of the experience. My investigation is based primarily on what French cognitive psychologist Pierre Vermersch calls an "explicitation interview" or "guided introspection". The conceptual starting point for that method is the belief that every experience has a subjective domain partly due to its pre-reflective character. The experience is not an object of one's reflection; it is immediate as it happens to a person. One can reflect on it afterwards or be conscious of it afterwards.

The first-person methodology researchers also argue that consciousness has many levels and one can explore those levels by, for example, an "explicitation interview" as proposed by Pierre Vermersch and Claire Petitmengin. The method involves an interviewer who, drawing on the knowledge from Neuro-linguistic programming (NLP), constructs carefully targeted questions to allow an interviewee access his consciousness. The questions are free from the interviewer's preconceptions and encourage an interviewee to direct attention into his own experience. The interviewee provides a description of conscious appearance of his experience by developing his own descriptive categories. Therefore the explicitation interview explores the sensory level of conscious experience, in opposition to more abstract dimension represented by verbalised, languaged experience, which is dominated by interpretations and explanations.

The interviewee is the only person who can validate the investigated experience hence his standpoint is called a first person position. The interviewer is referred to as a second person position since he is the one who guides the introspection, facilitates an interviewee's access to his experience. Researcher conducting an investigation stands on the third person position and he is the one who analyses the description obtained during the interview.

Those positions, however, do not always outline this way. The research presented in this paper explores my experience during an act of photographing Butoh

dancers. The independent photography projects were initiated by me and carried out in different locations in London: at the Westminster Underground station and at Abney Park cemetery I photographed Yuko Kawamoto and Tadashi Endo, and in National Gallery I took pictures of Katsura Kan. In those projects I acted both as a researcher and a subject of investigation. The description of my lived experience has been gathered through a mediator Dr Jane Mathison during the explicitation interview. Jane is a specialist in NLP (PhD in 2003) who followed Pierre Vermersch's training in explicitation methods. My two interview sessions were guided introspections based on NLP in a service of psycho-phenomenology. The chosen mediator has an expertise in the first person methodology, which allows her to guide and follow my cognitive processes, but does not have the experience of photographing Butoh dance nor the detailed knowledge of the dance. I did not inform her about the exact subject of my research. This was to ensure that a non-inductive manner of interviewing is applied and the possible biases are kept to minimum.

During the sessions we explored three moments: The first one was the moment when I had an idea of photographing a Butoh dancer in National Gallery. After considering different places, which I was not entirely happy with or convinced by, the place of National Gallery came to my mind like the 'eureka' type of idea. This exact moment was investigated with Jane and that lasted nearly one hour. The two other experiences explored were the moments during the act of photographing just before I pressed the button of the camera; just before making an intuitive decision of capturing a certain image that I saw, or rather experienced. First image was of Tadashi Endo and Yuko Kawamoto dancing on the stairs at the Westminster station and a passing by woman who came downstairs whilst the dancers were performing. The other image depicted Yuko Kawamoto kneeling down on a grave at Abney Cemetery. The interview sessions covered as well the seconds, which followed the camera's click. These sessions also lasted around one hour each. I will present the findings from the two latter sessions leaving aside the first one, which investigated the intuitive experience. The intuition regarding the appearance of some kind of concept not through a deductive enquiry, but suddenly, 'out of nowhere' was largely examined by Claire Petitmengin and my study fits in, to a certain extent, within her study. The intuitive moments preceding and succeeding the release of the camera shutter speed, however, have slightly different context. The intuitive moment of taking a photograph requires the immediacy of the body reaction. I propose to introduce the notion of the

pre-thought body movement and present its characteristics as bases for the photographer's 'inner' performance.

The experience has multiple sensory modes, including visual, auditory, kinaesthetic or olfactory processes. During my sessions body has been identified (through the use of NLP) as a dominant element. Jane paid attention to the extent how many times I used the word "I feel". Therefore she went that way and prompted with questions regarding my bodily awareness. She was checking if what I was describing was processing or making sense of something through the body. This approach was very surprising to me since when I entered Jane's office and she asked whether I was a dancer, I immediately replied that absolutely not because body is not my medium and that is why I "only" photographed the dance. During the session I discovered that my body awareness was mainly on my upper and lower body, but not on my head or eyes. I said: "I think my muscles are in my arms, my back, my legs, but not my head. I don't see my head, I don't feel my head." It appeared that whilst photographing Butoh dance, I do not perceive dancers with my eyes but rather with the rest of the body. This idea of non-seeing eyes is often present in Butoh dance. Scholars like Joan Laage or Toshikaru Kasai refer to dancers who roll back the eyes showing only whites in order to redirect the attention towards their interior, or to Butoh training workshops when the dancer asks students to imagine that their whole body is covered with eyes. In that sense, the photographer's performance emerges from the similar state of perceptive awareness. It is the body as an organic whole which connects the performer with the environment around.

The explicitation interviews revealed to me different dynamics present during an act of photographing Butoh. They situate themselves in a narrative line characteristic to a traditional theatre piece, and that includes an introduction, a culmination and an ending. I will present the photographer's performative experience in this order.

An introduction.

Many photographers have described a moment just before taking a photograph as hunting, waiting for the unknown to come into prominence. The description of my sensorial experience explains further what it means to be in the wait for a photograph. In the explicitation interview I reported: "It feels like a hunt (...)". Jane prompted: "How did you know it's like a hunt?" and I answered: "I think it's breathing and the air...kind of cold. Cold but like during summer time. And I think waiting for

something... (...) That I breathe in and it feels like breathing in, in order to wait for something. I think this breathing in creates something in my body, which goes like a vertical line. It's not fulfilling; it's more like preparing for something or clearing up. There is this strong feeling of the cold nice breathe. It's very silent as well." Guided introspection allowed providing more finely grained information of what was described by photographers with the use of an abstract language expression "to hunt for a photograph". The point of departure for the photographer's performance is the attentive mode, which becomes free of preconceptions. Similarly to a Butoh dancer, a photographer observes rather than acts, accepts what reveals itself to him rather than searches for fulfilment. He remains open and ready for some stimuli to arise. Therefore it is not a hunt for something that is known; a photographer is not like a hunter in woods who tries to capture an animal. He empties out his mind and body and observes what emerges from that state. That experience may have kinaesthetic, acoustic and olfactory dimensions, as it proved in my case.

Culmination.

The finger pressing camera button follows the mode of waiting. This is what photographers refer to as "intuitively capturing an image". Again, the guided introspection gives in-depth information what exactly it means in terms of the experience; how a photographer makes the decision when to press the button. During the interview I said: "I know I have to start taking pictures. J: How do you know that?" I replied: "The movement was I think this something floating from my body, from my muscles as if it was like water under pressure that just goes and splashes through the camera, through the lens and just goes to the dancers" and I carried on: "In the space between them [dancers] and me, there is this disturbance that is going on there. I know they are there because the space between them and me is not stable. There is something going on there. (...) It is a little bit like a tunnel but not really. It doesn't have the exact shape. It's more like little elements that are moving around and they cause this disturbance of ... I don't know if this is the feeling or something visual... I think it's a combination of smell I would say as well. I think it opens up the space between the dancers and me as if the air was pushed aside and this kind of tunnel without shape is created between the dancers and me. It feels very spacious. I can just breath it in." During an act of photographing I had a feeling of unity with whatever was going on; something was coming from me. It was hard to find a descriptive language for it hence in my report there are so many vague expressions

like: “a kind of”, “but not really”, “something like”. I sometimes described this unity as being in the same tunnel as the dancers; other times it was a bubble, which could expand in shape. I would suggest that the most creative moment during the photographing is when a photographer has that sense of unity. This is the moment when they click the camera button. This very moment, the mode of the unity has other dimensions too, apart from the particular consciousness of space. My body awareness was an important part of my decision making process. I reported: "I think it's just getting ready for some jump. Something needs to be done. (...) I think my whole body is just ready for something." I had a strong feeling of tension within my body. “My body is becoming very tensed. I can feel it in my hands, holding on to the camera much stronger. It’s very intense”, and I continued: “I think it’s somewhere in my chest, where the heart is. It feels very heavy. The muscles are nearly shaking.” The state of passive, calm waiting changed to a more active state, nervous and impatient. The small movements in my body required some action.

The ending.

After releasing the shutter speed there were a few transformations taking place in my perception. Firstly my body awareness changed. I stated: “It’s that heavy feeling...by pressing the button with my finger, the click...the lens very slowly closes and then the feeling just goes down, through the lens into my body through muscles. It feels as if I was standing on a stone that this heaviness went into.” The body relaxed and went back to the state just before when the feeling of waiting and hunting appeared.

My space awareness also became different. When taking a photograph of Yuko and Tadashi at the station I had a different sense of space when the passing by woman appeared; the space was full. And my perception of the dancers changed; they became unity. When the woman disappeared (which was after I took a photograph) the space was empty and the dancers became separate again. The sensorial perception of the dancer also changed when I took a picture of Yuko on the grave. Before, I perceived her as visually very strong, like a wild animal with defocused eyes, whose movement I could not predict. Afterwards her image became more relaxed, not so intense any more. I finished that part of the session saying: “Now it feels it can go on to the next thing, or maybe the same until the next click.”

In this paper I proposed a brief description of the Butoh photographer’s inner performance. Like Butoh dance, this kind of performance does not have to be visually

observable by others in order to exist. Toshikaru Kasai suggests that Butoh dance does not even have to be performed in front of the audience; it can take place only within and in the presence of the performer himself. Photographer's act is based on and justified by the similar contention. Whereas Butoh dancer's performance disappears in the vacuum of time, the photographers claim they are able to preserve their performative experience in a form of a photograph. Scandinavian photographer Maja Sandberg claims in her Butoh photography album: "My aim was to create images as an expression of my experience of the performance, not just to photograph stage production" (Sandberg, 2003, p 9). By providing a description of the photographer's performative experience, I would like to raise a question whether the invisible nature of Butoh dance, and in the same way an invisible photographer's performance can be encoded in a photograph, which operates in a visual mode. My paper questions the assumption that photographic albums are obvious documents of all those sensorial dimensions of the photographer's experience that takes place during photographing Butoh dance.

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