



What can't be seen can be seen: Butoh
politics and (body) play.

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[ECKERSALL, PETER](#)

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Abstract

Asobi, a Japanese term that connotes play and amusement is rarely associated with the physical or cultural dynamics of butoh. Yet as performer Yumi Umiumare who danced with Maro Akaji's dark-soul (ankoku) butoh group Dairakudakan for ten years argues: "these days their work seems more like pop" (Umiumare 1999). Bodies in performance are subject to the interplay of context and culture and for this reason what was once rare in art and distasteful to society can become commonplace and fashionable; To cite Jameson, a cultural turn of "postmodern mutations where the apocalyptic suddenly turns into the decorative (or at least diminishes abruptly into 'something you have around the home')" (1991: xvii). If attempts to signify butoh have become playful (for example, a trend seen in the increasing emphasis on performing the sensibilities of cuteness [kawaii] in Japanese post-butoh dance) and bodies are the decorative agents of the ludic condition, have we in fact reached an endgame for butoh? Alternatively, might artists not intensify the qualities of play in performance, escalate and increase their velocity to reach a point at which they explode and divulge an anti-playful opposite? This is to engage in what Auslander observes as a "transition from transgressive to resistant political art" in the postmodern era (1997: 59). resistance that might be found in this

resistant political art in the postmodern era (1997: 56), resistance that might be found in this instance in an intense accumulation of signs on and through the body and their reproduction ad infinitum to the point of absurdity. Except that there are apparent resistances to some bodies; resistance also in Asian bodies opening-up new spaces in contemporary Australia. Umiumare and her collaborations with Malay-Australian performer Tony Yap might be productively read in this way.

Keywords

performance studies; Butoh; dance; Japan; Australia

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