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Ji Eun Kim April 16, 2012

Postwar Japanese Avant-garde: Beauty in the Grotesque

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Abstract

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Contrary to the optimism and sense of liberation that marked the immediate postwar years, Japan rebuilt itself in the image of its nationalist past in the decades following World War II. The dissonance between the government's conservative policies and the ideals of the new democratic Constitution became a major cause of the chaos and eruptions of violence in the 1960s. Moreover, this discourse that took place between conflicting political and social ideologies inspired the abject aesthetics of Japanese postwar avant-garde art. The avant-garde movement struggled to answer many of the questions ailing the populace, which ranged from the superiority of the collective over the individual, the male over the female, and the West over the East. This paper will focus specifically on the female intermedia artists and male butoh artists, who represent two different art forms of postwar avant-garde, and observe the ways these artists concurred and diverged in the approaches to these questions. Ultimately, they both refused to reinforce prevailing power dynamics in the fabrics of human society, thereby reinforcing equality. Behind the grotesque, dark and seemingly absurd aesthetics of postwar avant-garde, the art form arguably encapsulates the same sense of optimism and hope for true democracy that marked the very beginnings of the postwar era.

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Introduction

Postwar Japanese avant-garde took root at a time Japan had begun rebuilding itself in the image of its nationalist past, contrary to the optimism of the immediate postwar years that it was on course to achieving true democracy. Avant-garde art forms of butoh and intermedia essentially critiqued the regression of Japanese government into authoritarianism as Japan entered the 1960s. The ideological, cultural and social instability of the 1960s, as well as wartime hardships, cultivated the nonconformist quality of postwar avant-garde. On one hand, Japanese avant-garde artists felt alienated by their own culture, which was becoming more and more conservative and thereby repressive of the freedom thought to be at hand with the conclusion of World War II. On the other, they also felt alienated by the Imperialist actions of the United States, which encroached on Japan as well as other Asian countries ranging from Vietnam and Korea.[1] Butoh and multimedia shared the common goal of challenging social conventions, both that of the West and the East, based on the aim to liberate the individual. Behind the grotesque, dark and seemingly absurd aesthetics of postwar avant-garde, the art form harkens back to the sense of optimism and hope for new beginnings that marked the very beginnings of the postwar era, an ideal that was effectively lost in the decades that followed 1945.

The changing political, social and economic tides of postwar Japan catalyzed the anti-political, violent characteristics of the avant-garde art form. With Japan's loss at the end of World War II came both a sense of freedom and repression: freedom for the citizens to express themselves individually, and repression of Japanese (Imperialist) history under the American Occupation. The discourse that took place between conflicting political and social ideologies during a significant portion of the postwar period inspired the aesthetics of Japanese postwar avant-garde art. The avant-garde movement struggled to answer many of the questions ailing the

populace, which ranged from the question of the collective versus the individual, the proper model of masculinity and femininity, and so on. This paper will focus specifically on the female multimedia artists and male butoh artists, who represent two different art forms under postwar avant-garde, and observe the ways they concurred and diverged in the approaches to these questions.

The immediate postwar period from 1945 to the 1950s was marked by a traumatic sense of loss, and with it, a sense of freedom. Many Japanese were disillusioned by the downfall of the militarist government, which had required them to sacrifice all their personal freedoms for the war effort. Mandatory military drafts and forced factory labor are examples of the lengths the government went to ensure that its citizens did their part. Japan's loss in World War II, however, proved all of that futile. The dismantling of the totalitarian government that followed allowed for cynicism of the Japanese people to proliferate in the form of writing and other mass media. There was an outpour of writings focusing on soldiers' suffering in the battlefield and Japanese casualties under the air raid and the atomic bomb.[2] Themes that became especially popular during this time included emphasis on the body, physical pleasures and decadence.

On the political front, the Americans immediately spearheaded a "re-interpretation" of Japanese history to reflect the "truth" at the onset of the American Occupation in the autumn of 1945. They eliminated passages about the divinity of the emperor and noble samurai from textbooks, censored the press, and executed militarist leaders as war criminals responsible for orchestrating the War. As feudalist values of prewar and wartime Japan were swiftly disposed of by the American administration, Japanese intellectuals rediscovered hope that Japan would achieve true modernity in the postwar period. "Rediscovered," as the democratic discourse had in fact already been established in the Meiji Period (though it had been forcibly suppressed by

the prewar emperor system).[3] The liberals during this time developed the "peace thesis," which argued that peace and democracy were the only ways to prevent another militarization of the state.[4] A sense of optimism permeated the political sphere of immediate postwar Japan: everything was about transformations and new beginnings, and Japan had truly been "reborn." Free of constraints of militarism and nationalism, Japan could resume its course towards modernity the War had interrupted.[5]

However, once Japan entered the late 1950s and began experiencing high economic growth, the political policy shifted towards that of the conservatives, whose aim was to prioritize the Japanese economy. The American Occupation ceased in 1952, thereby giving Japan back its independence. The conservatives seized this opportunity to put forth the agenda of allocating all of Japan's resources towards building its economy. The governing system essentially regressed to its wartime model where citizens were required to make sacrifices for the sake of the collective. This phenomenon was dubbed "reverse course," a term which captures the "shift in emphasis from demilitarization and democratization to economic reconstruction, rearmament, and integration into the US anticommunist containment policy."[6] The debate between the liberals and conservatives was ongoing until the 1970s, when the liberals would ultimately lose their persuasiveness as Japan achieved and maintained its position as an economic superpower under capitalism.[7] The struggle between those sides during the 1960s, however, was a violent one, and manifested in acts of physical violence in the form of labor strikes and student demonstrations in universities. The new Japanese government that emerged from three decades of debates after World War II was one based on the idea of conformity.

As noted, Japanese citizens found themselves in an environment of extraordinary freedom in chaos of the immediate postwar period, and this facilitated the radical and

experimental aesthetics of postwar avant-garde. Although Japanese avant-garde is said to have reached "full realization" from late 1950s to the 1970s and is noted for its large impact on contemporary Japan, this was a "second wave"[8] – the "first wave," or the very origins of Japanese avant-garde, can actually be traced back to the 1920s.[9] We cannot discount the "first wave" of prewar avant-garde activity as these historical avant-gardes greatly influenced the 1960s artists and their art form.[10] Prewar avant-garde emerged as a response to the social unrest of the 1920s, and explored themes of anarchy and "disavowed both mimetic reproduction and romantic subjectivity." In the historical context, it has been characterized as a form of rebellion against the post-Meiji era of government, which emphasized rationality, order and collective conformity, i.e., authoritarianism. Consider how this sort of environment was similar to that of the 1960s and 1970s Japan. The 1960s avant-garde was essentially a resurgence of 1920s avant-garde in the historical context.

Values of postwar Japan shifted drastically from between the postwar years and the advent of economic growth in the 1960s. There was an increased emphasis on the individual, physical pleasures and sense of suffering in the late 1940s, while decades from late 1950s to 1970s refocused on the betterment of the collective at the cost of that of the individual. Aesthetics of postwar avant-garde remained true to values of the immediate postwar period well into the 1970s, which follows then that the avant-garde movement represented a rejection of many of the values the Japanese government enforced as the political and social norm after the end of the Occupation period.

Intermedia

In postwar Japanese avant-garde, the physical body became an integral agent for expression. Accordingly, female avant-garde artists used their own bodies as a means to relay powerful messages regarding their identities to both Western and Japanese audiences. Although they dealt with two very different sets of gender stereotypes—the passive, sexual object of the West and the asexual ideal of Japan, respectively—they attempted to subvert both standards by adopting certain themes in their works. Their themes of freedom from social constraints, self-obliteration, and confrontational sexuality worked in tandem to shock audiences out of their preconceptions about Japanese women. The works of women Japanese avant-garde artists, therefore, subverted many of the constraints placed upon them by society.

Art establishments in Japan enjoyed a complex history before, during and after the developments of World War II. The government-affiliated Japanese art establishment called *gandan* was first established in the Meiji period. G*andan* sponsored salons where nominated artists could showcase their works, which was the means through which artists earned their status. That is, the more they featured in a salon, the more esteemed they were in the art sphere. The selection of artists accepted into salons were determined according to seniority, however, so new artists had to commit a significant amount of time to the *gandan* before they saw any advancement in their careers.

Then, some time later in the first half of the twentieth century arose the *bijutsu dantai*, or a new type of art surveys divided according to ideologies and artistic style. They emerged in opposition to the *gandan* system. The *bijutsu dantai* were more supportive in that each survey's leader mentored the younger members of the group, and they often held open exhibitions where nonmembers could submit their works to compete with current members. The *bijutsu dantai*

opened up opportunities for new and unaffiliated artists to garner publicity for their works. When Japan entered World War II, the totalitarian government suppressed all art exhibitions but those of war propaganda, which then inadvertently got discredited by Japan's loss at the end of the War. As prewar art establishments lost their popularity and relevance because of their affiliations with the conservative government, the *bijutsu dantai* gained enormous power. This newfound influence and the fundamental conformist nature of Japanese society, however, molded *bijutsu dantai* into the "new" *gandan* where artists unaffiliated with a certain *bijutsu dantai* once again found it difficult to gain exposure in juried exhibitions. The postwar *bijutsu dantai* system then catalyzed a second wave of retaliation from some Japanese artists: those that would gather under the banner of avant-garde (*zen'ei).* Avant-garde artists deliberately experimented with unconventional styles and media outside the scope of those represented by the *bijutsu dantai*. They also formed informal groups amongst themselves and sought out nonjuried exhibitions sponsored by the mass media, such as newspaper companies.[11] By the late 1950s, the avant-garde scene most definitely existed, but its vitality was greatly restricted. The avant-garde route wasn't economically feasible for most artists, as the market for Japanese avant-garde art was extremely small, with modern art museums preferring to purchase modern artworks originating from the West (*youga)* and works of conventional Japanese style (*nihonga*).[12]

All the control in the Japanese art world still nested in those higher in seniority for a decade after 1960, which was one of the major reasons that the diaspora of women artists intensified in the mid-1960s. Since the art world was entirely male-dominated, women who didn't have connections found it difficult to gain recognition. They comprised the bottom rung of the ladder, which meant they were subject to especially high scrutiny and criticism,[13] therefore having much reduced chances of being selected for exhibits. Also note that art institutions

considered seniority in the organization and overall status over the quality of the work. Since this was difficult for women to achieve, it followed then that they were at a great disadvantage to even get their art careers off the ground.

Another point to note is the gender-biased division embedded in the *Nihonga* and *youga* dichotomy in the Japanese art world. Japanese women were actually pushed towards the traditional arts style, meaning that they were more likely to be picked for exhibitions and find success if they pursued it over the modern, Western styles. The latter style was more or less restricted to the men: art circles hardly ever invited the women to present at juried expeditions in this particular genre.[14] Women that chose to pursue avant-garde, then, were in a sense doubly penalized for pursuing non-traditional art forms and for encroaching on what was considered fit for Japanese males only.

In addition to pressures for women to pursue *Nihonga* over Western art, women artists struggled with other discriminatory standards that were based on gender, most of which originated from the wartime period. During the war, Japanese citizens were expected to prioritize their duty to the nation before personal interests. Women were specifically assigned the role of producing "as many loyal workers and soldiers as possible" for the sake of the nation.[15] They were also forced into factories and were expected to contribute tangibly to the war effort by producing equipment to be used in war, such as parachutes.[16] Pressures for women to support a patriarchal society by marrying into wifehood were also so great before World War II that women who wanted to pursue art as a career had to remain single or go as far as cutting all ties with their family for the job.[17] Moreover, women didn't even have equal educational opportunities until the 1940s; they would only gain rights to admission to universities on equal

merits as the men after the end of World War II.[18] Societal rules and pressures posed obstacles for Japanese women desiring to make art their career.

The chaotic conglomeration of cultural, economic and political shifts that comprises the years during and immediately after World War II directly influenced career choices of Japanese women artists. Tradition-based establishments running the art world of Japan were slow to accommodate women in the arts, leading the ambitious among them to leave Japan altogether.[19] The women artists including Yoko Ono, Yayoi Kusama and Shigeko Kubota that are covered in this paper were able to make their name overseas in part because they came from wealthy backgrounds that supported their advanced education and independence.[20]

Women Japanese avant-garde artists typically found themselves in the vibrant art culture of Greenwich Village of New York after moving to the United States. Avant-garde as it took form in the 1960s in the US was very interested in blending various media as a locus of expression. "Intermedia," as this is sometimes called, enjoyed widespread popularity among all these artists. For instance, some incorporated engineering technology and digital video in their works, and others experimented with various other genres of art ranging from music to dance. Indeed, it may be more accurate to describe avant-garde productions in the 60s as a performance. This blending of virtually all boundaries in art that existed traditionally may be attributed to trends and climate of the art culture in Greenwich Village itself.

The art movement in Greenwich consisted of a mix of New Music, Happenings, Fluxus, New Dance, Minimalism, and Pop styles.[21] Fluxus was one of the biggest influences for Japanese women avant-garde artists, and was at first synonymous with experimental music. It then gradually grew in popularity for artists in areas outside of strictly music, such as poets. The vast array of talents that the Fluxus movement amassed led to another "branch" of sorts where

music became less of a focus than the artist's personality, actions, and opinions. This philosophy is identical to the approach artists like Ono and Kusama in particular chose to take.

Additionally, Happenings emerged around this time out of a similar vein of thought as Fluxus, and although slightly different from Fluxus in that the Happenings could be lengthy and strove to blur the line between "performance and audience, art and reality," they also had a huge influence on the expression of these female avant-garde artists.[22] Happenings at its core were a form of theatre, though unlike traditional forms of theatre, were informal in presentation and generally unrehearsed.[23] They may be formally defined as a "purposefully composed form of theatre in which diverse alogical elements, including nonmatrixeed performing, are organized in a compartmented structure."[24] These elements refer to storytelling components in traditional theater, which include sequential events, a climax, a conclusion, and character development.[25] Happenings rejected the traditional cause-and-effect flow inherent in theater storytelling and sought to assemble self-contained "scenes" – "compartments" – that refused to logically connect to one another. In other words, each performance was distinct in purpose and message from any acts that followed. In this way, the Happenings "abandoned the plot or story structure that is the foundation of our traditional theatre. This counter-traditional characteristic of the Happenings clearly lends itself well to the aesthetics of intermedia. Unlike butoh, as we will observe in the next chapter of this paper, the works of Japanese women avant-garde artists largely conformed in style to the umbrella avant-garde movement popular in Greenwich Village in the 1960s.

I. Methodology

Goals of 1960s avant-garde were as numerous as they were varied; they critiqued all aspects of culture including politics and consumerist lifestyle. While it is true that most pieces, if not all, reflected individual flavors unique to the artist, there were a number of common

objectives that these artists strove to achieve via their art. Some of the major goals of the art form were democratization of art and increased audience involvement. Both of these were based on the idea of facilitating communication between people from all walks of life.

The avant-garde movement strove to blend boundaries in art on several fronts, one of which was between the general populace and consumers of art. Artists wanted to expand exposure to those who weren't art enthusiasts or professional critics. One way that Yoko Ono accomplished this was by using kitchen utensils in a performance she would name, quite aptly, *Kitchen Piece.* This performance consisted of Ono running to a refrigerator, taking some eggs from it, and then hurling them at the wall to create a painting.[26] She used artifacts commonplace to housewives, namely, the refrigerator and cooking ingredients, as a means to infuse elements of daily life into her art.[27] Shiomi accomplished something similar when she used everyday objects such as a hammer, chair and wooden board to produce sounds that would comprise the music to her concert.[28] By incorporating items commonplace in daily life, avant-garde artists communicated their desires to equalize access to art across demographics.

A second boundary these artists challenged was one between audience and artist. The experimental nature of avant-garde gave them the freedom to pursue this objective in a very direct way. In 1960s avant-garde, audience participation became a major feature of intermedia art. Oftentimes, the burden was put on the audience to make the performance happen. By giving members of the audience instructions, the artists directed the audience to carry out the steps necessary for the performance. Yoko Ono was a big proponent of this; in her "Cut Piece," for example, she instructed members of the audience to come up to her and cut away bits of a dress she was wearing. Just from the name of the performance itself, it is clear that the actions of the audience were integral to the piece coming to fruition. Another avant-garde artist, Chieko

Shiomi, invoked audience participation in her performance of "Water Music." Smokers in the audience were asked to light their cigarettes from a candle set over a bowl of water. Their breaths, as they bent over the water to light the cigarettes, then set ripples across the water, and produced the visual "music" over the "water" that Shiomi wanted to achieve in her performance. Intermedia artists bridged the chasm between audience and the performer by giving the audience a bigger role in the proceedings.

Thirdly, to tie these two ideas together, avant-garde artists increased both exposure and audience engagement by challenging the traditional distribution of art, i.e., the hegemony of museums. They essentially took the performance to the people rather than waiting for people to come to them. One way they instituted this was by organizing street performances, which they dubbed "happenings." Happenings were a way for the artists to pull in people who normally wouldn't come to museums to see art, and since they took place in the streets, were much more casual venues for people to come see and be exposed to the message. Almost anyone could RSVP to the events, which were relatively inexpensive, if not free, to attend. Kusama speaks to the importance of this new "form" of distribution when she describes these "live performances" as fundamentally different from "dead art" sold in galleries. The experiential aspect of avant-garde facilitated more involvement of the people in the art in addition to highlighting the unconventionality inherent to the art form.

II. Themes

Themes of intermedia invoked ideas of freedom from social constraints, self-obliteration and subversive sexuality. Although not all of these artists associated themselves with the feminist movement, these ideas all worked to subvert gender biases against women.

Social Freedom

Freedom from social constraints was one of the central themes of women avant-garde artists. The most exemplary proponent of this was Yayoi Kusama. Kusama sought freedom from her childhood upbringing, which was dominated by a cutthroat militarist government regime, absolute superiority of the patriarch, and a controlling mother, all of which worked in tandem to impose a set of social constraints on her conduct and status as a Japanese woman. These constraints became the impetus to her art: they at first imposed denial, frustration and emotional instability in her character, then later influenced her to produce works that abstractly challenged these factors.[29] The social liberation advocated in her artworks rejected aspects of her background that directly represented factors oppressing Japanese women in the immediate wartime and postwar periods.

As briefly mentioned above, during the war, Japanese citizens were taught to sacrifice their personal liberties and happiness for the sake of the nation. The collective took precedence over individual interests. Women were judged unfit to serve on the battlefield as soldiers, but were nevertheless put to work to aid the war effort by being assigned to factory labor. Kusama was personally a victim of this as she was forced to sew parachutes for the soldiers' use throughout World War II. Note that the Japanese government put the women in service of the men, or, in other words, gender roles for the Japanese during the war were hierarchically structured such that women were treated as subordinate to the men. When Kusama moved to the United States and started her avant-garde career, she put the sewing skills learned during wartime to use in creating her soft sculpture series, which she named *Sex Obsession*. She wrapped protrusions reminiscent of the phallus in the fabric that she sewed herself. Then, she

put these protrusions everywhere around a representation of domestic space: over the couches, the bed, and the walls. In doing so, she effectively converted the phalli to a benign, silly decoration for the private sphere.[30] By appropriating this symbol of masculinity, Kusama ultimately "castrated," or transcended, male authority in *Sex Obsession*.[31] By using the very skills the war instilled in her to serve the male, she rejected their forced superiority over her gender, thereby liberating herself from her Japanese, militarist upbringing.

Another major figure Kusama advocated freedom from was her extremely controlling mother. Kusama saw her mother, who was violently against her becoming an artist and wanted her to become a housewife, as a manifestation of male oppression of women during the war period, as someone directly passing on the constraints the militarist regime of WWII Japan imposed on her by the virtue of her female gender.[32] Due to her extreme dislike of this style of upbringing, Kusama developed a distinct aversion to her mother that would very prominently feature in her early sketches where she vandalized images of her. Specifically, she overlaid a sketch of her mother with countless dots, blotting out her existence and what she represented[33]. Kusama personally derived psychological relief out of this practice, as images of these dots and her mother's face emerged in her nightmares and haunted her terribly; by forcing herself to face them again and again, she was able to desensitize herself to the fear of these two ideas.[34] By destroying images of her mother, who was essentially a personification of male dominance associated with Japanese militarist rule, Kusama sought freedom from these constraints.

Self-Obliteration

Like the theme of freedom, self-obliteration gave these women artists the means to transcend gender constraints placed on them by society. Although Kusama is credited for coining the exact term "self-obliteration," the concept itself is evident in the works of many

Japanese women artists. Kusama defines self-obliteration as destroying oneself in order to "become one with eternity."[35] The objective is to lose oneself, or one's identity, in order to discover a larger truth. For the women artists, self-obliteration holds two major implications: one is that they may cast off the various constraints placed on them by society by the virtue of their gender, and the second is that by forcing the audience to witness the moment women are obliterated, they push the audience to acknowledge the underlying politics fueling gender inequality. Moreover, by engaging in this practice, the women wrestled control over the female body from sexual objectification. By converting their bodies from an object onto which society could project its desires into an instrument of personal expression, Japanese women artists were able to transcend the gendered expectations superimposed on them by a male-dominated society.

Self-obliteration (of the female body) entails at least two steps, the first of which is obviously inserting, or replicating, the female body as the central object of the performance. Postwar avant-garde is distinctive for its emphasis on the physical body as an object of expression. Accordingly, these women artists starred in a large number of their own performances, rendering their own bodies as the target for self-obliteration that they would enact in their pieces. If they weren't physically in the pieces themselves, they frequently used photographs or mannequins in their own image.

Once the above step was complete, the artists could partake in the actual act of destroying of the self. Kusama and Kubota performed this step in slightly different ways. Kusama, just as she did with images of her mother, obscured photographs and mannequins of herself, and even her everyday clothes, with polka dot patterns. This technique was used for the same purposes as in the photograph series regarding Kusama's mother in that it intended to diminish the presence of the subject. Kusama interjected these patterned objects (herself) into rooms made up of

mirrors also patterned all over with polka dots, which had the striking effect of blending her body into the background of the room, effectively obliterating it.[36] Another artist by the name of Kubota similarly obscures her body from the audience's view. In the beginning of the performance, she stands nude (accentuating her sex) atop a staircase, which she slowly descends into a mass of foam.[37] The audience is left to watch the gradual erasure of her body. In both Kusama and Kubota's works, the female body was successfully destroyed, finalizing the second step of self-obliteration.

There are a number of objectives women avant-garde artists achieved by incorporating the theme of self-obliteration in their works. One is that by doing unto their bodies (even if it was the act of destroying it) something of their own accord, they effectively "took back" the female body from the whims of society, which characterized women's bodies as fetishistic, sexual objects solely for consumption by the mass media. The intent of these women artists to liberate the female body is exemplified by Ono's *Freedom*. *Freedom* is a film clip showing a woman struggling out of her brassiere, which essentially "stresses the importance of freeing women from socially determined, restrictive roles through a liberation of the body."[38] It is clear that these artists' consciousness of being women was one of the major factors driving their art. Another goal they were able to accomplish was making the audience confront mainstream biases against the female gender. In Kubota's case, the obliteration of the woman was gradual; the entirety of the performance focused on the body of a woman undergoing slow destruction. The audience therefore had no choice but to direct their attention to the subject undergoing deconstruction. From the moment the woman was visible, the audience projected, or affirmed, their biases against her body as was seeded in them by the media; then, they would watch as the embodiment of those biases was completely destroyed in performance. The erasure of the

female body, in essence, symbolized a means for women to shed, or transcend, society's tendency to overly sexualize the women's body. Fundamentally, the dichotomy between "object" and "subject" in regards to the female body is questioned under the theme of self-obliteration. Japanese women artists were able to convert the female body from sexual object into a subject of performance by using it as agents of their own expressions rather than passively leaving it to serve society's desires.

Confrontational Sexuality

As much as they found it liberating to be active in the US, Japanese women artists still dealt with a set of prejudices leveled against them by the virtue of their race and gender. Society's preconceptions of Asian women undoubtedly influenced how some of these artists chose to approach their own work.[39] In the West, the view of Asian women was very much based on the *Madam Butterfly* ideal: Asian women were seen as passive, childlike and servile.[40] They were presumed to be not only subordinate to men, but also much more sexually available than their Caucasian counterparts. Japanese women, therefore, were seen as sexual objects. This stereotype is particularly important as it explains the extreme, or unattractive, sexuality that many of these artists chose to express through their art.

Thus, postwar female avant-garde artists employed visceral sexuality in their performances that served to reject the desirability of female bodies as sexual objects. While nonchalant nudity found in Ono's and Kusama's pieces certainly qualify under this, perhaps the best example of confrontational sexuality is in Kubota's portfolio. Both her *Vagina Painting* and printed media she incorporated into her performances challenged the mass media's commoditization of the female body.

Vagina Painting forwarded its radical message by alienating its audience with graphic displays of sexuality. In this piece, Kubota painted red onto the floor via a brush inserted between her legs. The audience watching this was reminded of menstruation, a decidedly unattractive aspect of women's sexuality, and discomfited men and women alike. Moreover, Kubota's allusive use of a sexual organ in the performance can be interpreted as "a subversive attack on male voyeuristic views of the female body as a commodity."[41] Kubota deliberately forced the audience to confront an abject aspect of female sexuality to the effect of attacking society's preconceptions of Japanese women as pleasantly docile, attractive sexual objects.

One of Kubota's video sculpture series similarly employs the female sex organ, rendering it unattractive then forcing the audience to confront it. In this particular piece, Kubota placed a fan turned on inside a bag, creating a moving object for the audience to observe. The distinguishing feature of this bag was that it was reminiscent of a vagina, only with the zippers of the bag open, gave the image of it having teeth. Kubota essentially used the vagina as a symbol of women, much like Kusama's use of the penis for the men. She may have been referring to the *Vagina dentate*, or toothed vagina, which is a Surrealist metaphor for the male fear of castration, with this moving sculpture; in which case, she would have nullified male authority by alluding to the loss of representation of male power, while at the same time capitalizing on a symbol of women's sexuality.[42]

Essentially, Kubota sought to subvert the commoditization of women's bodies by shoving it into the audience's faces; once, she did this quite literally. In one performance, Kubota printed body parts that were considered sexual, e.g., the lips, on napkins, which she then handed out to the audience. When the audience used the napkins to wipe their faces, they were forced to consider the sexual connotations of those body parts so casually and often reinforced by the

media.[43] Again, similarly to *Vagina Painting*, Kubota utilized female sexuality in a way that discomfited her audience. By manipulating female sexuality to display it as something not entirely desirable, Kubota subverted commoditization of the female body.

Postwar women avant-garde artists dealt with themes of freedom, self-obliteration and subversive sexuality in their works. Kusama's desire for freedom can be traced back to the strict war regime that ruled Japan during World War II, where women were relegated to subordinate roles. Self-obliteration had the effect of empowering women by representing an exercise by which women could take control of their bodies back from the whims of the mass media. Similarly, subversive sexuality challenged the commoditization of women's bodies. All three themes worked in tandem to attack gender biases held against women.

Prewar, wartime and postwar patriarchal values of Japan all worked to the disadvantage of postwar women artists. Women were essentially pressured to subordinate themselves to male power. Coupled with the hierarchical structure of Japanese art circles, a Japanese woman's career in the modern arts was nearly impossible during the 1960s. This ultimately led to the diaspora of women avant-garde artists to the United States, a direct retaliation against the gender conventions of Japan.

In the United States, Ono, Kubota, Shiomi and Kusama would forward a list of common themes in their performances. They advocated ideas of freedom from social constraints, self-obliteration and subversive sexuality. Social freedom allowed these women artists to directly refute male dominance in society. Self-obliteration returned the female body to the hands of women, converting it into a "subject" belonging to and under free control of an individual rather than an "object" for the projection of male desires. Finally, abject sexuality subverted the

fragmentation of women into their body parts by discomforting the audience with isolated pieces of the woman's body, particularly the vagina.

These women artists usurped power from the male for themselves in several ways. One was by rendering the symbol of the male, the phallus, obsolete. Kusama accomplished just that in her *Sex Obsession,* using it as benign domestic decorations. Kubota arguably did as well with her allusion to *vagina dentate*, which referred to the loss of embodiment of male power. The disorientation and discomfort inflicted on the audience in these avant-garde pieces was another way that these artists gained power for themselves. Self-obliteration and visceral sexuality speak to this effect on the audience. In essence, Japanese women avant-garde artists empowered themselves by negating the symbol of male power while projecting symbols of female power.

Butoh

Aesthetics and the philosophy of butoh are heavily rooted in the time period from which it originated. During the immediate postwar years, Japan saw its conservative value system crumble under the infusion of Western ideas, and then resurrected again at the cessation of the American Occupation. The period of cultural, social and political changes that Japan was subject to after the 1950s was not entirely peaceful. Some groups, such as university students, became especially vocal in their protest of the conservative Japanese government's policies. In fact, the student movement and its affinity with violence and the grotesque was a major source of inspiration for butoh.

The student movement was originally self-contained in that its activities were confined to specific universities. The students only sought to "democratize" their own schools, e.g., purge militarist professors from the faculty, reorganize the student government, rally for increased student say in university, and so on. The students started getting active outside their campuses and collaborating with other groups, however, as the government passed a certain series of laws in the late 1940s. They instated a policy of increased tuition fees, decentralization of national universities, and the "red-purge" which were passed in 1947, 1948, and 1949, respectively. All of these issues were seen as threats to a democratic educational institution, and as those were matters that affected all universities, the university students thus united.[44]

Specifically, they established an organization called the *Zengakuren* in 1948 in response to the state's intent to increase fees by 300% and to reorganize the national universities under local jurisdictions. This plan would lead to the formation of a board of trustees, installing an extra layer of control over the universities. The *Zengakuren* was comprised of a number of private, municipal and national universities, and considered the entire student government of one

university as its member, not any individual student. Since student governments considered all students belonging to a university as its member, and over 70% of Japanese universities belonged to the *Zengakuren*, a significant number of students held affiliations to this group. The *Zengakuren* began stirring into action as an inter-campus in response to the announced dismissal of "Red" professors at major universities. In 1950, they protested lecturers visiting campus to propagate this policy, held strikes and took up arms against the police at Students' Assemblies. *Zengakuren*'s activities marked a second stage of the student movement where it evolved from an isolated series of protests into a nationwide, inter-campus effort.[45]

Eventually, the movement grew to take action against political matters rather than those strictly related to education. The issues students contested included whether Japan should revise its Constitution to allow for rearmament, if Japan should conclude a peace treaty with the Western and Communist nations and whether Japan should agree to a universal nuclear test ban. The students participated in protesting these issues with the consciousness that they were doing so as Japanese citizens rather than students. This facilitated cooperation with non-student organizations. Thus, after 1951, the student movement evolved from being strictly concerned with educational issues to expanding outside university campuses into national politics.[46]

The *Zengakuren* wielded a sizeable amount of power and directed all student activism in the 1950s. However, as Japan entered the 1960s, the group became split by inter-factional antagonism originating from disagreement over the most appropriate strategy against the US-Japan Peace Treaty. From 1965 to 1970, the group experienced a mix of cooperation and eruptions of violence amongst its sects; fights broke out between groups at different campuses, between radicals and non-radicals, and between general students. The instability of *Zengakuren* escalated into a bloody struggle for hegemony between 1970 and 1975. Students simply started

destroying sects with different ideologies and tactics, seeking to establish their own as the superior. This ultimately led to the fragmentation of the student movement as the struggles culminated in several deaths and disillusionment of all the students involved.[47]

Politically speaking, the student and other civil movements of postwar Japan wanted to preserve the Constitution drawn by American authorities; they agreed with its pacifist and democratic ideals. The conservatives leading the Japanese government were on the opposite side of the spectrum, choosing to focus instead on traditional Japanese values and reestablishing Japan as a global power (economically).[48] The student movement gained momentum as the government passed conservative policies in 1950; it essentially was a struggle to establish freedom of the individual from national, or the collective, interests. The goal of the student movement, as well its eruptions into chaotic violence in 1950 and the 1960s, are analogous to what the avant-garde dance form of butoh strove to achieve in the way it chose to achieve it. Butoh adopted dark and mercurial aesthetics to forward a nonconformist message, much like the characteristics of the student movement.

Butoh is a performance art that combines elements of folk tradition, Japanese mythology, theater, and dance.[49] It emerged in the 1960s amidst a politically volatile Japan, and as one would expect, shares this time period's qualities of violence, chaos and anger in performance. Butoh, in fact, may be considered a physical and spiritual outcry against the turmoil ailing Japan at the onset of the postwar period. By specifically utilizing grotesque motifs, violence and gender bending in performance, male butoh artists transcended both Western dominance and the Japanese model of masculinity.

I. The Development of Butoh

Butoh was at first rejected as a legitimate art form by the Japanese dance world for failing to adhere to Western conventions. Many butoh dancers were trained in the Western style, and then chose to use their education in ballet, modern and jazz to express a Japanese identity. In essence, in using Western dance styles to reinvent Eastern identity, butoh dancers transcended Western sovereignty. The very first butoh piece ever performed was a rather controversial piece called "Forbidden Colors." This piece alienated many of its classically trained audience, both due to its style and theme. For instance, the forms used in "Forbidden Colors" were completely unlike those that could be found in ballet, therefore were far from being considered beautiful according to Western conventions. Hijikata specifically looked to "austere forms and gestures reminiscent of ancient Japan for inspiration," which entailed forms close the ground, like squatting.[50] Thus, Hijikata purposely sought to reject guidelines that were distinctly non-Japanese through his performance. Thematically, too, "Forbidden Colors" alienated its audience. Hijikata expressed uncontrolled, barbaric savagery by using live animals as props and having the dancers move about in wild abandon.[51] In the performance, a young boy, after being handed a chicken by an older man, squeezes it to death between his legs. The older man then entwines his body with the boy's, and they proceed to roll around the dimly lit stage to a tape of deep breathing and moaning.[52] The brutal and homoerotic content of "Forbidden Colors" shocked many who did not expect something so explicit or taboo to be played out for the public. Due to its radical departure from conventions, "Forbidden Colors" was not well received by critics or the masses in the 1960s.[53]

However, although most critics and the mainstream audience rejected butoh, a handful of experimental artists found themselves inspired by Hijikata's vision and joined his efforts. Butoh

persisted into the 1970s and on at the hands of these few. Goda Nario, a butoh critic, touches on a reason why these artists might have felt drawn to butoh here in his review of "Forbidden Colors":

> "It made those of us who watched it to the end shudder, but once the shudder passed through our bodies, it resulted in a refreshing sense of release. Perhaps there was a darkness concealed within our bodies similar to that found in 'Forbidden Colors' and which therefore responded to it with a feeling of liberation."[54]

Goda touches upon an important point relating to the appeal of butoh. He implies in this critique that butoh was liberating because it exposed for the first time emotions that society condemned.[55] Moreover, the audience could empathize with this particular darkness showcased in Hijikata's piece. Hijikata himself is known to have stated that the content of "Forbidden Colors" should not be particularly shocking compared to the chaotic state of Japan in the 1960s. As the 1960s was a turbulent time of shifting social and political values, perhaps this darkness resonated with the audience because it acknowledged the bitterness and uncertainty that had been building up in the minds of the Japanese people amidst all the change. In any case, butoh found life at the hands of a few avant-garde dancers and persisted into the decades following its creation despite widespread, public rejection.

"Forbidden Colors" set a stylistic precedent for Hijikata's following pieces of Leprosy and Rebellion of the Body, as well as for other butoh artists that chose to follow him. Shinfune Yoko was one such artist. Concurrent with Hijikata's theme of the grotesque, Shinfune pursued social taboos in his work. Rape, violence and death were common to his pieces, though he sometimes chose to represent them in abstract ways by having his dancers play animals or mythical creatures to represent disease and sexuality. The characters in his pieces were clearly fictional and transcended conventional definitions of gender, social class and role.[56] These factors lent a fantastical quality to his works that both corresponds to and enhances his personal

performance theory, which was that performance was more than a sum of dancers' movement. According to him, "it is not the bodies that dance, but what comes spilling into the physical space as result of the gesture of those bodies."[57] This force he described as being entirely otherworldly in that individuals couldn't hope to achieve it physically on their own. Though the reason or purpose behind Shinfune's employment of the grotesque was borrowed from Hijikata, he also expressed it in a way that was applicable to his own needs and philosophy.[58]

Similarly to Shinfune, Ohno Kazuo performed butoh and explored themes similar to Hijikata's. Ohno was a dancer who significantly influenced Hijikata and, rather than characterizing him as another follower of Hijikata's, Ohno is perhaps better described as the second founding father of butoh. It was Ohno's modern dance performance in 1949 that pushed Hijikata to create butoh,[59] and the dancer who acted the part of the young boy in "Forbidden Colors" was in fact Ohno's youngest son. He collaborated with Hijikata on a few butoh pieces over the course of eight years including Admiring la Argentina and Diviinu sho. Diviinu sho depicted the death of a male prostitute and was performed solo by Ohno. As a partner to Hijikata, Ohno also dealt with the theme of death and drew inspiration from his past experiences with the war.

Natsu Nakajima is yet another butoh artist who was part of this first generation of butoh pioneers along with Ohno. Nakajima established her own company named Muteki-Sha, or Foghorn, in 1969.[60] The name of the company refers to the foghorn of the ships that facilitated the evacuation of Sakhalin Island, which she personally experienced, before the island was occupied by Soviet troops in 1943.[61] Nakajima focuses on a softer style of butoh compared to her male colleagues.[62] Although Nakajima does employ the grotesque in the bodily transformations of the dancers, the grotesque element is much more controlled and refined

compared to Hijikata's handling. For instance, in the piece Dance of the Seven Autumn Flowers, the grotesque is embodied by a shrunken, collapsed figure of a dancer representing a fusion of woman and child, a forced hybrid of infancy and old age. However, while the visuals might invoke horror, the movements employed in the piece are minimal and unthreatening.[63] While the element of grotesque is present in Nakajima's works, her presentation of it is notably calmer and less violent compared to other first-generation butoh artists.

Like Nakajima, there were other notable female butoh artists who were a part of the movement, such as Hiruta Sanae. In terms of theme, Hiruta drew a lot of her inspiration from raw and powerful human emotions. She refers specifically to The Tears of Eros by Georges Bataille, which depicts a lynching that took place in China. The face of the tortured, contorted with overwhelming emotion in the book, is said to hold beauty in her eyes. Her beautification of "ugly" human emotions is similar to Hijikata's preference for the negative sides of the human experience. Hiruta's butoh capitalizes upon extreme human emotions that result from harsh circumstances, and the grotesque is employed to express that to the audience.[64]

In the 1970s, butoh would become popularized in the West, particularly in Europe. The reason for this likely was because butoh's ideals and those of Europe's artistic movements were analogous. Butoh is essentially surrealist: it values "the irrational, the marginal, the dispossessed."[65] Butoh, like surrealism, seeks to connect to the unconscious mind by employing grotesque themes and imagery,[66] however, as alluded to in the Introduction section, butoh and surrealism enjoy a much more complex relationship. Butoh's routes can be traced back to prewar Japanese avant-garde of the 1920s. Recall that the early surrealists active in the 1920s were in contact with and heavily influenced the 1960s avant-gardes, and Hijikata's butoh was no exception. The 1920s avant-garde set the framework that 1960s avant-garde would retaliate

against per its fundamental principle to "reject all '-isms' and refute all acts."[67] As a counter-cultural movement, it sought departure from precedents, but paradoxically, that principle in itself was surrealist. In rejecting early surrealism, butoh successfully emerged as a new, radical form of expression, however doing so encapsulated the essence of surrealism itself.[68] In this way, butoh had plenty to offer to European arts and literature of surrealism and expressionism.[69] The relationship between prewar avant-garde and postwar avant-garde are contradictive and paradoxical, yet integral to the fundamental goal of the art form.

In addition, a softer form of butoh specifically called the Amagatsu emerged in the 1970s. As butoh was introduced to the West and garnered interest, this new style emerged as a more delicate alternative to its predecessor. It employed mirrors and fog to create a more ethereal atmosphere to the performance. Movement was also reduced to a bare minimum to enhance the feeling of calmness. Thus, the 1970s represented the first major branching of butoh style.[70] Despite the Japanese origin of butoh, butoh managed to garner Western interest nearly a decade after its conception.

The mid-1970s marked another significant change to butoh as an art form. In 1974, Hijikata stopped dancing altogether and started exclusively choreographing for other artists. One artist in particular with whom he worked intensively is named Ashikawa Yoko. Ashikawa had no formal dance training, which may have been just as well, as Hijikata mostly worked with her to create a series of gestures that would comprise the fundamental vocabulary of butoh. He drew inspiration from many sources, ranging from poetry, painting and literature as well as his own experiments with surrealist expression. Hijikata's final product encompassed both verbal and visual directions that were vague enough to leave plenty of room for individual interpretation.[71] By the 1970s, Hijikata abandoned shocking choreography altogether and experimented more

with simplified expression. With Hijikata's switch to choreographer, butoh became an art form with more framework, no longer an entirely abstract and philosophical experiment of bodily movement but one beginning to develop its own set of vocabulary of movement.[72]

The changes that butoh went through from its conception to popularization were all very closely linked with the social, political and cultural climate of Japan spanning the 1960s to 1980s and beyond. When Hijikata first conceived Butoh, it was very much a grotesque dance form. Relaying ideas of violence, death, and overt sexuality, it was so unprecedented that it split the Japanese dance community into two extremes: one side vehemently rejected it, while the other was completely engrossed. As other dancers were brought into the art form, what originally was a form of personal release for Hijikata became more diversified, which brought with it a relatively wider base of appeal. Generally, butoh evolved from being strictly a violent, "masculine" form to one that encompassed a calmer, more "feminine" sort of expression. If one considers how the violent demonstrations of the student movement also petered out in the 1970s, an analogy may be drawn between the stylistic changes of butoh and the socio-political climate of Japan. The cause for this change was the splintering of different student groups, which wore each other out as the fighting dragged on. Similarly, the butoh movement fractured into decentralized, individual interpretations strongly based around the founding artist as the dance form became more and more formalized. Moreover, it would not be farfetched therefore to conclude that the political trajectory of butoh corresponded to that of the student movement: individual freedoms were desirable over the betterment of the collective.

II. Postwar Models of Masculinity

Similarly, while butoh wasn't particularly sympathetic to the West, it also rejected collectivist Japanese values, specifically those pertaining to "expectations" or "requirements"

that the state placed upon its male citizens. The ideal model of masculinity in wartime Japan, the unquestioning soldier, and that of postwar Japan, the unquestioning company worker, were both rejected by male butoh artists. Both of these models, though from different time periods, emphasize individual sacrifices for the sake of national prosperity.

In the 1930s and early 1940s, Japan was ruled by militarism. The dominant male ideal during this time was, accordingly, "men-as-Imperial soldiers." The state dictated that men existed solely to serve the Imperialist army; therefore they should strive to discard individual will and beliefs, as they may interfere with carrying out orders. After World War II and Japan's resulting loss, however, Japan underwent demilitarization by the Allied Occupation. The soldier model of masculinity was forced to undergo a change as well, as loyal soldiers were no longer necessary for the state rule. Two new models would emerge to replace it: the My Home Papa and *kigyou senshi*, or Corporate Warrior.[73]

My Home Papa was a model imported from the US from the onset of the Occupation. It emulates the American family ideal, with two heterosexual parents and their 2.5 children living together as a nuclear family unit. The pre-World War II model of the family, in stark contrast to this, was *ie,* where families lived among multiple generations with the patriarch at the head of the house managing all the family assets. Succession was also from the father to the eldest son. The men under the *ie* system were allowed absolute power, and therefore were often characterized as an oppressive ruler of the family. My Home Papa remodeled the father figure completely by characterizing it as a, "loving, caring, chief breadwinner."[74] This model, however, soon became obsolete as the "breadwinner" role kept the men away from home for longer and longer hours, essentially robbing them of their ability to fulfill the part of the family man. Japan's deeply ingrained cultural tendency to confine women to the private, or domestic, sphere also contributed

to this. Having men contribute to housework when the women were always available to do so was considered a waste of resources in the state's perspective, i.e., an inefficient use of potential labor hours. This quintessentially American model of a family did not take root as a result of clashes with traditional Japanese cultural values.

The Corporate Warrior model, on the other hand, endured for longer, and to an extent, still persists today. It became popularized in the 1950s when Japan entered a period of rapid economic growth. As the name implies, the men under this model are expected to commit themselves to their work life, above their familial and private interests. They are also required to maintain loyalty to their companies to the point that this affiliation becomes a part of their personal identity. Within the company, he holds a specific social status, which is determined by his graduation year, history with the organization, and actual title. Finally, when given an order, the Corporate Warrior is expected to execute it without questioning the morality or rationale behind the action. One's personal feelings or desires cannot be the basis for one's action; rather, the will of the organization takes absolute precedence. Peripherally, the Corporate Warrior model endorses a gendered division of labor where the men work outside the home and the women are left in charge of the private sphere. The fundamental difference between the My Home Papa model and the Corporate Warrior modifies the husband's time commitment to the home, which is clearly lacking in the latter model. The fact that death rates from overworking and work-related stress remain high even today shows the prevalence of the Corporate Warrior as the ideal form of masculinity.

In a sense, the Corporate Warrior ideal is not too different from the "men-as-Imperial-soldiers" ideal in their requirements to sacrifice for the greater good. Both models require unquestioning submission to authority and the execution of orders regardless of personal moral

or ethical qualms.[75] The only difference between the two is that the wartime period conditioned the men for maximization of Japan's military prowess, while the postwar period did so for Japan's economy. Recall that bolstering the economy was a major concern of the Japanese government from the 1960s and on, while superior military strength was obviously the chief goal of the wartime regime. Both are state concerns. Thus, the fundamental idea behind the soldier ideal and the company worker are identical in that the men were to sacrifice themselves for the sake of the collective.

III. Themes

Themes of butoh are analogous to goals of the student movement in that they rejected conformist values imposed by the state. The postwar ideal of the company worker is one such example of the state seeking to sacrifice the individual for the sake of the collective. Male butoh performances protested social constraints by emphasizing themes of transcending human society, the grotesque, gender bending and confrontational sexuality in their art. These elements culminated in a direct attack on social conventions and values perceived to be limiting to the individual.

Beyond Society

Butoh advocated freedom from society by transcending it altogether. It utilized nonhuman elements and explored the spiritual space, i.e., elements outside the fabric of everyday society, on the stage. For the butoh artist to achieve a state of being beyond the confines of social conditioning, he had to "shed the social skin," either by transforming into something nonhuman like an animal or by capitalizing on the mind to achieve spirituality, e.g., by connecting with a spiritual entity like Mother Nature. Losing connection to humanity entails freedom from all associated expectations and social decorum imposed on humans by society.

Thus, male butoh artists were able to transcend the onslaught of cultural and political values imposed on the Japanese male during the postwar era.

Butoh artist Min Tanaka especially emphasized nature in his performances. Min Tanaka's butoh company, called Mai-jyuku, is specifically based in the countryside. He utilizes wide-open spaces, the fresh air, and natural environment mostly undisturbed by people as the setting for his pieces. Since his pieces are conceived, practiced and performed entirely outside, nature is ever-present and integral to making his productions come to life. In once case, heavy rain began to fall during one of Tanaka's performances, and the darkened weather ended up obscuring at least half of the performance that was prepared. Rather than responding negatively, Tanaka was thankful because he believed this enhanced the performance rather than detracted from it.[76] Tanaka's performance and butoh theory heavily depend on an element beyond the scope of human society.

Similarly, a butoh artist by the name of Atsushi Takenouchi explores *jinen,* or the "cosmic connections" that humans have to higher powers.[77] Under the direction of Ohno, Takenouchi studied the essence of the universe, an entity beyond human society, and developed his personal butoh into one that taps into the natural environment. It is aptly named *Jinen Butoh*, or Dance With Nature. Takenouchi travels all over the world and deliberately seeks out places that have a heavy karmic atmosphere, or where large amounts of human suffering or joy historically took place, such as war sites and nuclear testing areas.[78] Perhaps he felt that it healed the land to perform dances on it, to purify it of the human experiences that took place there, much like the notion of catharsis. Takenouchi finds significant meaning in connecting to a bigger context, the universe which nature represents, in his performances. Like Tanaka, natural background is a key element to Takenouchi's pieces.

An alternative means by which butoh dancers could find freedom from society was to act a nonhuman role in performance. If they were no longer human, they would no longer be bound by societal rules. It was common to find animalistic behavior and movement in butoh performance, be it the incessant twitching reminiscent of insects or the on-fours prancing about the stage clearly referring to beasts. In this vein, artist Shinfune incorporated the supernatural into his pieces by creating roles based on mythical gods representative of natural phenomena, such as death. With all these nonhuman forces at work, societal rules no longer apply, as nonhumans are not expected to comply with social decorum.

Grotesque

As mentioned in the previous section, early butoh performances were especially violent, crazed, and charged with negative emotions. The grotesque quality of butoh accomplishes two things: one is that it harkens back to the war period, thereby denying the spread of Westernization that takes place after the war, and another is that it denies Japanese nationalism. The latter directly relates to the concept of self-obliteration as the negativity is directed inward, towards their culturally conditioned, male Japanese bodies.

The negativity and haunting visuals of butoh encapsulate the suffering the artists were forced to experience during the war. Hijikata and Ohno clearly drew from their personal background of poverty and battlefield experience, respectively, as source material for the early butoh pieces. For example, in *Summer Storm,* Hijikata acts the part of a girl from Tohoku, his home region. She looks about absently in a crouching position until she eventually staggers out of her hunch. Hijikata tries to get up onto one foot, and repeats this motion several times, helpless to stand and trying one broken attempt after another. In his speech "*Kaze Daruma,"* Hijikata explains the harsh conditions of Tohoku in the wartime period for children, how infants

were left in rice cookers or tied to posts as the parents left home to work in the fields.[79] Ohno similarly depicted harsh life experiences that originated from the War. Ohno spent the final two years of his service as a war prisoner in New Guinea, from which he was one of the two thousand out of eight thousand that survived. His piece Jellyfish Dance from 1949 is believed to refer back to sea burials he witnessed as he was being shipped back to Japan.[80] The choice of butoh artists to recreate their war experiences rather than look towards rebuilding and progress is a symbolic rejection of the intrusion of the West into Japanese policies that followed the end of the War.

Moreover, the grotesque element takes on a second meaning if we consider how these depictions of struggle and pain are directed inward, culminating in a practice of self-harm. This practice links the grotesque element to the idea of "shedding the social skin," though in a much more provocative and violent way than simply emphasizing a nonhuman element. Note that these butoh artists are male, Japan-raised and fully grown. The subjects of mutilation, then, become completed products of social conditioning of Japan. Ultimately, self-harm comes to represent a direct destruction of Japanese masculinity.

There are a number of forms of self-harm depicted in butoh, ranging from physically maiming one's body until it bleeds as in *Three Phases of Leda*[81] to embodying disease as in *Leprosy*. In Hijikata's *Leprosy*, Hijikata performs the part of someone inflicted with the disease. He moves about slowly on shaking limbs while using an artful combination of dim lighting and makeup to accentuate his intense facial expressions.[82] He willingly inflicts the disease upon himself. Another example can be found in Shinfune's work, where rape is a particularly prevalent element. Since the dancers are men, the victim of the rape becomes the Japanese male. By subjecting themselves to this act, the butoh dancers violate and demean the very embodiment

of Japanese masculinity. The inward direction of the grotesque supports the idea that male butoh artists desired to reject the ideal Japanese masculinity.

The grotesque elements in butoh mirror the ugly, bizarre and insufferable aspects of the world.[83] A successful butoh performance brings these out from within the dancer and audience, successfully immersing them in the negativity inherent in wartime Japan, the antithesis to Westernized progress and reform. Recreating these experiences on the stage facilitated healing from wartime trauma in a cathartic fashion. Secondly, this deliberate twisting, punishing and distorting was oftentimes directed at the artists' own bodies. In punishing their male Japanese bodies, they degraded the Japanese male and the socio-economic expectations conditioned into them.

Gender Bending

Gender bending is a third way in which butoh performers, specifically Hijikata and Ohno, obliterated their male Japanese body. Similar to the logic behind self-harm, they erased their presence by replacing it with a female persona on stage. It should be noted, however, that this transformation of gender is deliberately left imperfect so as to leave the audience with a sense that what they are portraying is closer to a transsexual, an entity straddling the male and female dichotomy, than a full-fledged woman. This is arguably more effective than a complete obliteration because the Japanese male remains present on stage, therefore reminding the audience to actually consider the subject being erased, or perhaps more accurately, distorted. Male butoh artists undermined the significance of the Japanese male by juxtaposing the female gender onto their own bodies.

Hijikata takes on a female role a number of times in his piece *Hijikata Tatsumi to Nihonjin*, or Hijikata and the Japanese. At the beginning of the performance, Hijikata enters the

stage from inside a palanquin. He is adorned in a long kimono and with a golden phallus in hand. Already, there is dissonance between his unquestioningly male gender and the female character portrayed by his dress. He soon sheds the kimono to reveal his naked, male body, cementing the dichotomy even further. In later acts of this performance, Hijikata dons a long dress and dances violently in steps reminiscent of the waltz and flamenco. His transformation into a woman isn't perfect, but this is indeed the point that reminds the audience this performance represents emasculation of the Japanese male rather than a realistic portrayal of women.

Interestingly, Hijikata would take on a female persona even in his personal life with the adoption of his dead sister into his own body. By the 1960s, he suddenly claimed that his older sister had come to live in his own body, and began wearing a kimono with his hair hanging long or tied in a bun and speaking in women's language.[84] This relationship seemed to have been a destructive one, however, as Hijikata is quoted to have said, "When I am absorbed in creating a butoh work, she plucks the darkness from my body and eats more than is needed. When she stands up inside my body, I unthinkingly sit down."[85] His dead sister's personality is at complete odds with his desires and needs to the point that she even cannibalizes parts of his identity. Hijikata's change in demeanor, as well as the effect of his sister's consciousness on his own, reflect an incomplete merging of genders as one would be able to find in a butoh performance.

Ohno also engaged in gender bending practices in his art. His iconic piece of *Admiring La Argentina,* which is divided into two major parts, has him depict Jean Genet's character Divine, a transvestite prostitute. The performance entails Ohno showing Divine's last moments of life and rebirth as a young girl, and as a result creates a striking juxtaposition of lively, childish, girlishness of Divine with Ohno's aged male body.[86] Ohno's physical body prevents

him from perfectly depicting a girl. The incomplete transformation draws attention to the male Japanese body as a subject of obliteration while accomplishing the act of obliterating itself.

Butoh founders Ohno and Hijikata both incorporate the female gender into performance for the purposes of undermining Japanese masculinity; it serves to balance, or more accurately, neutralize, the male gender of butoh dancers. In fact, this technique is quite similar to the use of ballet, jazz and flamenco movements in performances of *Hijikata and the Japanese*. According to Surrealist principles which butoh dew heavily from, the "agent" of negation must be the antithesis, or opposite, of the "subject" of negation, and must be brought in contact with the subject for the actual negation to happen.[87] The title *Hijikata and the Japanese* indicates the intent for these two elements to be opposite one another, and Hijikata arguably was opposite the Japanese in that he embodied Western dance techniques in the performance. The juxtaposition of male and the female in butoh performance culminated in negation of the male gender in the same way. The dissonance in the presentation preserves the grotesque quality of butoh at the same time as it makes it slightly clearer to the audience the intent behind the gender bending.

Confrontational Sexuality

Butoh also incorporated blatantly sexual themes into performances as a way to affront the audience and attack social conventions. Homoerotic themes were a defining characteristic of Hijikata's early butoh works, and as was discussed earlier, was one of the elements perceived as most controversial. In addition to experimenting with taboos, Hijikata had no qualms about exhibiting the phallus in his performances. Sexual acts and body parts associated with them were recreated in a public space, thereby violating social decorum. Thus, Hijikata directly contested social conventions limiting sexual expression for individuals.

Hijikata's *Rose-colored Dance* included all elements of homoeroticism, sexual acts, and exhibition of genitals. The first act of this piece depicted two dancers who each put one end of the tube into their mouths, and the other end into their anus. The tubes were entwined with one another in a way that made it impossible for the dancers to dance apart unless one freed an end of a tube and detangled them. Thus, these dancers were connected to one another via their mouths and anus – a combination that may be interpreted to represent sodomy. *Rose-colored Dance* also included a set with Hijikata and Ohno, who entered the stage in long white dresses. Ohno would look under Hijikata's skirt, exposing what was underneath to the audience, before turning him over then stretching out over him in a position reminiscent of sodomy once again.[88] The audience is exposed to Hijikata's genitals in this later act as they are to a blatant depiction of a homoerotic sexual encounter. All of these elements comprise a collection of sexual themes opposite those of the heterosexual norm.

A butoh experiment called *The Program* also sought to recreate a sexual act in a way unnerving to the audience. *The Program* had a box with hard candies in the shape of a hand, a phallus and a pair of lips to be distributed to the audience. Inside were instructions to consume the candy; the audience, thereby, was directly challenged to either shake hands (as they held the candy to their mouths), kiss, or perform fellatio on the candy. This experiment, which was conducted as part of a series of butoh acts, allowed for an imitation of fellatio in a public setting, and was handled in a way that affronted the audience.[89] *The Program* achieves the goal of challenging social decorum regarding sexual expression in a way that is disturbing to the audience.

Butoh values the irrational, the marginal and the dispossessed—particularly the characteristics that encapsulate the sense of turmoil and suffering prevalent in wartime and

postwar periods of Japan. The art form drew significant inspiration from the violent student movement of the 1960s and shared much of the political and socio-economic sentiments of the reform movement, which rejected both the conservative Japanese bureaucracy. Butoh utilized its themes of transcending social conventions and gender bending for the purposes of self-obliteration at the same time it used the grotesque and subversive sexuality to affront social norms. Since the performers of these acts were male, the Japanese model of masculinity and the entailing political, cultural and social conditioning it represents, became the subject of this erasure. In other words, male butoh artists used the art form as a means to obliterate the aggregate of Westernization and Japanese tradition, all in an effort to reject conformist values that cannibalized the individual.

Analysis

The turbulent political, social, economic and cultural climate of postwar Japan largely drove the nonconformity in the theme and aesthetics of butoh and multimedia art. Although the immediate postwar years were marked with optimism for true democratization and peace, the Japanese government ultimately regressed to one that sacrificed individual freedoms for the sake of national prosperity. By the 1960s, it became quite apparent that "new" Japan would not become a society based on true equality. Postwar Japanese avant-garde artists protested these disproportionate power dynamics, specifically those between the collective and the individual, male and female, and the West and the East. They essentially exposed and criticized the failure of the state to build an egalitarian society in the aftermath of World War II. Thus, butoh and multimedia embodied the individualist and freedom-yearning spirit of the immediate postwar years.

I. The Collective and the Individual

Conceptually, the social body is defined as one that sets the norm for all the individuals of society. It exemplifies the cultural conditioning that an individual is subject to as he or she grows into his or her social niche and roles.[90] In a sense, the social body is the antithesis of everything that can potentially disrupt the balance of society.[91] On the other side of the coin, the individual body refers to the lived subjective experience of people. It is comprised entirely of one's interpretations of what they experience or what they come to believe is the truth.[92] Since the social body represents a model for individuals to follow, it exerts considerable pressure on the individual to conform to it, and therefore occupies a position of higher power.

The discourse between the collective and the individual body is a fundamental element of postwar avant-garde. Those that do not conform to the social body are brutally marginalized in

society. Male butoh artists and female intermedia artists rejected this power structure between the social and the individual bodies by making the marginal the center of their performances. They embraced the abject and the unaccepted, raising a voice of objection against the status quo. The avant-garde artists specifically accomplished this by adopting the grotesque aesthetic, which directly contradicted that of beauty in mainstream art, and by employing overtly violent and sexual themes, which violated social decorum.

One of the more obvious sets of dichotomy tested by postwar avant-garde is the graceful and the refined; alternatively, the beautiful and the grotesque. Traditionally, a number of models of beauty have existed in Japan, especially in the context of performance art; which can be condensed into two major "lines" of the *okashii-wabi sabi-aware* and the *utsukushii-kirei-kawaii.* The latter pertains more to the mainstream, popular culture definitions of beauty, prettiness, and loveliness, respectively, while the former prizes the amusing, elegance and sensibility. Both of these lines represent a codification of Japanese aesthetics.[93] Since postwar avant-garde strove to reject the status quo, the *okashii-wabi sabi-aware* and the *utsukushii-kire-kawaii* that embodied traditional Japanese performance aesthetics were rejected on the avant-garde stage.

The *okashii-wabi sabi-aware* line had a particularly strong influence on Japanese performing arts, especially traditional theater. The *okashi* aesthetic dates back to Sei Shonagon's era, around 1000 AD. It can be best described as being entertaining in a strange way. The later Heian period introduced the completely different second element of *wabi sabi*, which reinforced simplicity, elegance, and subtlety. The notion of *mono no aware* finally followed later in the Edo period, and encouraged empathy towards transience of life.[94] These three principles outline the aesthetics of traditional Japanese theater, the Noh and Kabuki: the vibrant make up of Kabuki speaks to the *okashi* principle, while the solemnity of Noh's proceedings embody *wabi sabi* and

the presence of ghosts as major characters in both types of plays is evidence of *aware.* For Japanese living in the postwar period, this line represented an anchor for the intellectuals and artists that wanted to retain their Japanese identity in the face of Western modernization in the nineteenth century.

Neither butoh nor multimedia conformed to traditional Japanese performance art aesthetics. There was no elegant dress, makeup, or movement vocabulary that the postwar avant-garde adhered to. In fact, the makeup used to paint the butoh dancer's face (and sometimes even his body) was applied in a way to evoke images of horror. Hijikata's white powdering of his face for *Leprosy,* for example, intensified the contorted expressions of pain that passed through his face when combined with dim lightning of the stage. Ohno's turquoise eye shadow painted halfway up his forehead for his part in *Admiring la Argentina,* too, disproportionately emphasized his eyes, creating a face that was quite unsettling. Kusama, from the multimedia front, chose to make the abject the subject matter of her dotted photograph series by depicting people inflicted with gonorrhea and other sexually transmitted diseases. The visuals of postwar avant-garde were decidedly unattractive, embodying an aesthetic outside prevailing norms.

Avant-garde artists also emphasized the carnality and sexual functions of the body, specifically by depicting abject sexuality and the fragmentation of the body. Hijikata recreated sodomy on the stage on a number of occasions, the first of which was *"*Forbidden Colors*"* with the young boy and man dancing to a sound tape of breathing and moaning. The homoeroticism was an affront to the heterosexual normative, as was the act of sex itself to social decorum. Kubota's *Vagina Painting* managed to offend some members of its audience as well for its depiction of menstruation on the stage, which was considered a public place. Finally, *The*

Program offered a chance for the audience to engage in and watch others perform fellatio. These themes alienated and shocked the audience for their blatant violation of social decorum. Interestingly, they are all rooted in the physicality inherent in the individual body (and lacking in the social body). Postwar avant-garde's emphasis on sexuality and violence empowered the presence of the individual, thereby undermining the supposed superiority of the hegemony.

II. Male and Female

Japanese avant-garde artists also protested the fact that women and men occupied unequal positions of power in society. The male butoh artists and female multimedia artists, however, rejected this relationship in different ways. Specifically, the men incorporated the female gender into performance for the purposes of obliterating the male gender, while the women artists obliterated the female gender. The male artists effectively effaced the power and status associated with the male, while the women artists did so to the effect of empowering their own gender.

The fundamental difference between sex and gender is that the latter is entirely a social construct. Generally, perceptions of women as inferior compared to the men are, although not quite universal, relatively widespread. This is evident in the relegation of women to societal roles that lack power, influence and status. Studies have narrowed down the source of this bias against women as either being based on biology or culture, or both.[95] The biology model explains that women, as mothers, were interpreted to have better nurturing dispositions, and therefore were pushed to the private sphere of the home. The men, then, were left with the burdens of the public sphere, which encompasses politics and work. Note that these roles tend to be associated with more power in society as political decisions and economic activity can have national (if not international) impact, thus leading to the perceived inequality between men and

women.[96] The cultural model, on the other hand, is less formalized. It simply points out that cultural values differ between cultures; therefore, different qualities constitute what is considered masculine versus feminine behavior from culture to culture. Thus, if one considers the differences in standards present in culture for women and men compared to the indisputable classification of mothers and fathers under biology, one can make a distinction between biological sex and gender as being separate and different from one another. Sex, in other words, refers strictly to biological classifications of male and female, while gender refers to "masculine" and "feminine" sets of behavior.[97]

Gender models are more malleable compared to the biological classifications of sex. Therefore, Japan, over its history, was able to modify what constituted the ideal Japanese man and woman. Particularly in the postwar period, for example, the notion that men were better fit to do sports while women were to dance was imported from the West. Traditional Japanese theater restricted itself to male performers only, which shows that Japan didn't inherently have biases against men in the performing arts. This Western ideology, however, was adopted smoothly into the Japanese social body.[98] Participation in sports entails physical fitness, which in turn facilitates high agricultural production, industrial production and general labor. All of these benefit and contribute to the development of the nation.[99] It makes sense that ideals that would further national interests would be adopted by the state. Women, in the same vein, saw increased acceptance into artistic fields with the adoption of this principle. Western principles regarding gender roles had significant effect on shaping what was to be considered the norm in Japanese society after its contact with the West.

Neither the butoh nor the intermedia artists conformed to societal definition of masculinity or femininity. They experimented with the idea of the physical body as a subject

under their own whims, rather than an object of society to commodify to serve its needs as it sees fit. By projecting unconventional gender expressions in performance, they wrestled the control over their Japanese bodies from the nation state.

Both the male butoh artists and the female intermedia artists chose to feature the female gender in their performances for subversive purposes. Ono in "Cut Piece" sat docilely as the audience approached her and cut away pieces of her dress, eventually stripping her of the garment. She performed the part of a passive Asian woman, which concurs with the Western gender stereotype. In forcing the audience cut up her dress and humiliate her, however, she discomfited them. Moreover, she was able to observe the audience feel this discomfort throughout the performance—essentially torquing the male gaze into the "female" gaze as she gained control over it and directed it towards the audience. The men, similarly, emphasized the female gender in performance by substituting their own male gender with that of the female. Ohno and Hijikata performed in dresses and makeup clearly intended to portray the female gender. In the context of postwar Japanese avant-garde, the female gender had a large presence in performance. This may be explained by the fact that the female gender represented the "inferior," or the marginalized, gender. Similar to the argument posed in the social versus the individual body section, emphasizing the oppressed female gender is a way to directly contest superiority of the male gender, i.e., prevailing social norms.

Note that the societal perception of women as being inferior to men necessitated that the male artists utilize the female gender for what they wanted to accomplish, while the women had no choice but to adhere to their own. The motivation for male butoh artists behind infusing the female gender into their performance was in order to access the "Other," allegedly, the area of the subconscious shrouded in "darkness."[100] The female gender is opposite of that of the male,

and therefore encapsulates a realm of psyche unknown to male artists. Hijikata described his coexistence with the female gender within himself as a violent struggle, and the way he portrayed the female gender certainly speaks to this quality. His portrayal of the female gender was anarchic in that he freely exhibited his male genitals while moving about on stage in a dress or kimono. Not only did Hijikata bend the boundary between genders, he portrayed the female gender in a way that was entirely inconsistent with society's graceful ideal for women. This point is analogous to what the women artists tried to do by portraying their own gender in unattractive, confrontational ways.

The women artists, however, did not try to substitute their gender by substituting it with their opposites, the male gender, like the male artists did. If they had done so, their transformation would have entailed conforming to male values and code of aesthetics, which essentially would be undermining the very thing they wanted to accomplish: to transcend male control over what was deemed appropriate for their sex. In other words, emulating male values and sense of performance aesthetics would have meant that they were conforming to them, therefore reinforcing the status quo. There is commonality in both the male and female avant-garde artists portraying the female gender in a grotesque way in the performative space. Underlying this commonality, however, is the very gender bias that women artists wanted to rebel against and the male artists were free from by the virtue of their gender. In fact, in characterizing the female gender as a source of struggle and negativity, Hijikata perhaps even reinforced the stereotype against women as being the marginal sex. The fundamental difference between the male and female avant-garde artists was that the women artists had to pursue an art form true to their identity and gender while the male artists sought one that was different from their own. Although they both refuted the societal pressures on Japanese women to be graceful,

asexual and docile, male butoh artist Hijikata ultimately reinforced the preconception that women were abject.

III. West and East

Also note that many of these dichotomies overlap, i.e., are not all mutually exclusive of one another: the power dynamic between men and women, for example, is mirrored in the West and the East dichotomy. Japanese women that went into art found themselves pushed towards the traditional arts and completely discouraged from pursuing Western, modernist art forms and genres, such as oil painting. Western styles were deemed more appropriate for the men since they were thought to be better at spearheading "culture" and "progress." Because Japanese art circles mirrored Japanese society in that they were hierarchical and top-down, women artists were more or less confined to the *Nihonga*. Thus, the males represented the West, which carried connotations of modernity and progress, while females represented the East, of tradition and inertia.[101]

In a way, Japan reinforced the superiority of Western culture while repressing its own. The West was associated with progress, while Japan was linked with tradition. Moreover, the male was associated with the West, while the female was associated with Japan. The fact that Japan interpreted Western thought as superior—which is evidenced by its configuration of it as male, the supposedly superior gender—belies the value of its own culture. The question of power in the West and East dynamic is especially pertinent in the postwar context. At Japan's loss in World War II, the nation was essentially subordinated to the West, disillusioning many Japanese citizens. In the Occupation that followed, too, America held an authoritative position over that of Japan. Both the history and gender analogies reflect the power imbalance between the West and the East.

Butoh and intermedia both rebelled against this West-and-East, male-and-female bias. The women artists clearly rejected the traditional arts by choosing to pursue avant-garde art. They even chose to move outside the country to the United States in order to make a viable career out of their choice. By becoming active in an art form reserved for Japanese men, women artists such as Ono and Kusama subverted Japanese gender roles. One could even make the claim that the women artists supported the Western art form while rejecting that of the East. The male butoh artists, on the other hand, were partial to neither the West nor the East. While it is true that many were trained in Western dance styles such as ballet, jazz and flamenco, and danced steps borrowed from those styles in performances, they employed just as many movements that distinctly weren't Western. In *"Forbidden Colors"*, for example, the Man dances a jig reminiscent of jazz,[102] but runs straight-legged about the stage, which directly violates aesthetics of ballet. Male butoh artists maintained neutrality in the Western versus Eastern discourse by employing elements borrowed from both Western and Eastern dance styles. In this way, the male avant-garde artists rejected the notion of Western superiority, while the female artists reinforced it, if only to transcend the other constraints placed on them by Japanese society.

Conclusion

Postwar Japanese avant-garde took root at a time Japan had begun rebuilding itself in the image of its nationalist past, contrary to the optimism of the immediate postwar years that it was on course to achieving true democracy. The dissonance between the government's conservative policies and ideals of the new Constitution eventually spawned violent demonstrations of the student movement and produced clashing models of masculinity. This ideological, cultural and social instability of the 1960s, as well as wartime hardships, cultivated the nonconformist quality of butoh and multimedia. Postwar avant-garde specifically refused to reinforce prevailing power dynamics in the social versus the individual body, male versus female, and West versus East discourses. The butoh and multimedia artists concurred in emphasizing the physicality of the body and violating social norms as means to empower the individual. They also both rejected male superiority, though women artists did so by empowering the female whereas the men weakened the male gender. Male and female avant-garde artists then diverge on the issue of West and the East, where the males do not advocate superiority of the West, while the females embrace the West, as doing so empowers them. Although butoh and multimedia were separate artistic movements, they shared the common goal of challenging social conventions. Behind the grotesque, dark and seemingly absurd aesthetics of postwar avant-garde, the art form encapsulates the same sense of optimism and hope for new beginnings that marked the very beginnings of the postwar era.

Notes

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