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Title	Butoh beyond the theatre : Ohno Kazuo on the University campus
Sub Title	舞踏の教育利用について： 慶應義塾大学日吉キャンパスにおける大野一雄舞踏公演
Author	小菅, 隼人(Kosuge, Hayato)
Publisher	慶應義塾大学日吉紀要刊行委員会
Publication year	2019
Jtitle	慶應義塾大学日吉紀要. ドイツ語学・ 文学 (Hiyoshi-Studien zur Germanistik). No.58 (2019.) ,p.181- 191
JaLC DOI	
Abstract	
Notes	羽田功教授退職記念号 = Sonderheft für Prof. Isao Hada 退職記念に寄せて = Zu Ehren Prof. Isao Hada
Genre	Departmental Bulletin Paper
URL	https://koara.lib.keio.ac.jp/xoonips/modules/xoonips/detail.php?koara_id=AN10032372-20190331-0181

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Butoh Beyond the Theatre

Ohno Kazuo on the University Campus[1)]

Hayato KOSUGE

*Professor Isao Hada has been searching for innovative forms of education all throughout his career at Hiyoshi Campus. He eventually created the project series, "Heart, Body, and Mind" (*Kokoro-to Karada-to Atama-to*), its main purpose being to release university students from inflexible ways of thinking deeply fixed in their minds through the competitive entrance examination system. One of the most fruitful achievements of this project is the productions of Butoh performances and workshops by Ohno Kazuo, one of two Butoh giants, in the university lecture hall, gymnasium, and the research building event space. This was a peculiar challenge as Butoh was and perhaps still is widely known as an anti-traditional and anti-aesthetic experimental culture out of keeping with the academic community, whose reason for existence is regarded as the pursuit of research, education, and scholarship within the highly institutionalized system. The Butoh performances, however, have become one of the most anticipated events for new students, and these performances that began in 1994 have continued under the sponsorship of the Keio Research Centre for the Liberal*

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1) Part of this essay was read at the annual conference of the International Federation for Theatre Research (FIRT/IFTR) at the Institut del Teatre in Barcelona, Spain, on 24th, 2013. The theme of the conference is *Re-routing Performance / Re-caminant l'escena.*

Arts (established in 2002). This essay examines the Butoh performances of Ohno Kazuo on the Keio University campus and considers their significance.

Ohno Kazuo, along with Hijikata Tatsumi, is one of the giants of Butoh and the most celebrated performer in Japan's post-World War II theatre. Ohno Kazuo's performances outside of theatres are important for the discussion of the re-routing/re-rooting of the value of contemporary performance, the educational possibilities of Butoh, and the unique functions they have established. We can find that Butoh scenes and the corpus of Butoh performances have the power to change student preconceived ideas in the institutionalized system. In short, while considering the workshops and performances in the university lecture room, the impact and function of Butoh will be considered in this essay.

Before turning to a close examination of the significance of his performances, let us start with a brief review of Ohno Kazuo's life and career. Ohno Kazuo was born in Hakodate City in Hokkaido, the northernmost part of Japan, in 1906, and died at a hospital in Yokohama in 2010 at the age of 103. He graduated from the Physical Exercise School of Nippon Taiikukai in Tokyo in 1929 and soon after took a position as a physical training teacher in a private school in Yokohama. In the same year, he had possibly his most important artistic experience: he saw a performance of the Spanish flamenco dancer, Antonia Mercé y Luque, whose stage name is La Argentina, at the Imperial Theatre in Tokyo and was greatly moved. This experience would lead to his magnum opus, *Admiring La Argentina*. In 1933, he entered the Eguchi-Miya Dance Laboratory, whose founders had been taught Neuetanz by Mary Wigman in Germany. He then became deeply involved in the world of modern dance, but he was called up for military service in 1938, also the year in which his son Yoshito was born. He was sent to China and New Guinea and would later become a prisoner of war in 1945.

After an eight year hiatus, he came back to Japan in 1946 and resumed his modern dance career. At the end of the 1950s, he began a collaboration with Hijikata Tatsumi. Around 1957, Hijikata gave himself the stage name of "Hijikata Genet" and introduced his innovative dance style. In 1959, he performed *Kinjiki* (*Forbidden Color*) with Ohno Yoshito, which is regarded as the starting point of Butoh. Hijikata, however, broke with the Western form of artistic resistance. *Hijikata Tatsumi to Nihonjin: Nikutai-no-Hanran* (Hijikata Tatsumi and the Japanese: The Rebellion of the Body) in 1968 was a pivotal piece in the history of Butoh. In the meantime, Ohno Kazuo and his son, Ohno Yoshito, together with Hijikata, became regarded as the founders of "Ankoku Butoh," the Dance of Darkness. In 1977, when Ohno Kazuo was 71 years old, he presented *Admiring La Argentina* directed by Hijikata Tatsumi. He gained international acclaim after performing it again at the Nancy International Theatre Festival in 1980. He followed this performance with the publications of *Ozen* (1980), *My Mother* (1981), *The Dead Sea* (1985), and *Water Lilies* (1987). He continued his artistic activities even into his 90s and at the age of 103 was hospitalized in Yokohama, passing away on the 1st of June, 2010.

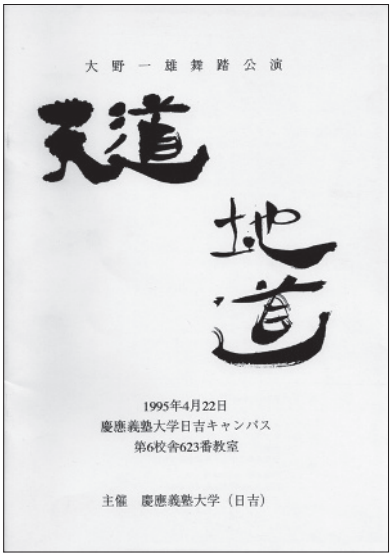
After the 1980s, Ohno's performances became popular worldwide. In 1986, for example, the year Hijikata Tatsumi died, Ohno performed in Australia, Brazil, Germany, the United States, France, Belgium, the United Kingdom, and Italy. It can be safely said that the 1980s and 90s were the years when the world discovered Ohno Kazuo and Butoh. He gained not only box office success but was also praised for his artistic values. The overflowing theatres were filled to such an extent that in the first New York International Arts Festival for the Asia Society at the Lila Acheson Wallace Auditorium in 1988, "The Asian Society had to schedule an extra performance by Kazuo Ohno because the demand for tickets was so great. Callers were so aggressive that a box-office attendant threatened to quit," according to reports from the *Village Voice* (*Kazuo Ohno Chronicle of*

a Lifetime 1906–2010, 71). Moreover, for his North American Tour in 1993, an article in *The New York Times* by Tobi Tobias read: "Kazuo Ohno's concentration is profound; his projection of it radiant. While the younger Ohno is an admirable technician and craftsman, the elder Ohno is like a mad genius who has long ago obliterated the line between theatrical let's pretend, which always remains within the pretender's control—and an ecstatic, imaginary universe of which he is the solo inhabitant" (*Kazuo Ohno Chronicle of a Lifetime 1906–2010,* 83).

Although Ohno Kazuo appeared at various dance festivals and performances all over the world, he also gave many performances and workshops out of theatres, such as in hospitals, Buddhist temples, and on university campuses, as well as in dance laboratories. Novelist Kakuta Mitsuyo, who graduated from the school where Ohno was teaching, shared her memory of "an odd old man" dancing at the Christmas Mass (*Kazuo Ohno Chronicle of a Lifetime,* 50). When he was invited to the Nancy Theater Festival in 1980, he was eager to present a dance piece titled "An Invitation to Jesus" in front of Jesus inside the church. He left for France with little knowledge of the churches in Nancy, wondering whether it would be possible to dance in one of their churches. It turned out as he hoped it would, and he wrote in detail of a genuine feeling of joy in a beautiful essay (*The Palace Soars through the Sky: Kazuo Ohno on Butoh,* 110–14). His Butoh was not only for theatrical expression but for the sake of his own soul and feeling.

Among his performances outside of theatres, Ohno Kazuo performed the seven following pieces for educational purposes at Keio University's Welcome Festival for freshmen students from 1994 to 2000: *The Palace Soars through the Sky* in 1994, *The Road in Heaven, The Road on Earth* in 1995, *The Ohno Kazuo's World* in 1996, *The Universe and the Body* in 1997, *A Person of the Universe* in 1998, *Ohno Kazuo's Universe at 92* in 1999, and *Flower of the Universe* in 2000. Almost all of these performances were given in the lecture

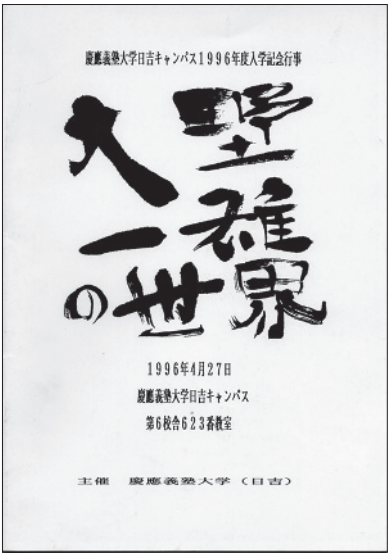
***The Palace Soars through the Sky* (1994)**



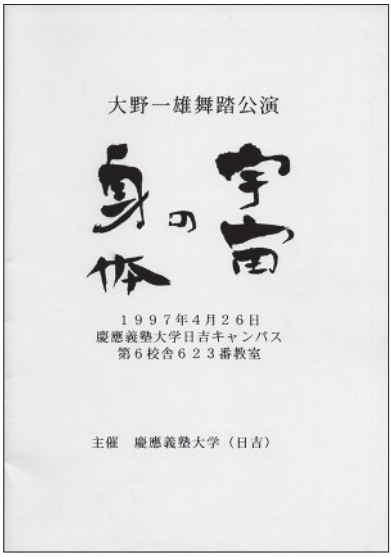
***The Road in Heaven, The Road on Earth* (1995)**

hall and gymnasium at the Hiyoshi campus in Yokohama, sometimes with Ohno Yoshito and other guest performers. Each year, more than 500 excited students, many of whom had never experienced Butoh, gathered for the performances, leading again to overflowing crowds at the performance venues. This project at Keio University was proposed, as mentioned before, for the purposes of relaxing the tension of freshmen students who had only concentrated their attention on the entrance examination with the hopes of inculcating within them a more flexible attitude regarding their ideas and future possibilities.

Another important aim of the welcome festival was the more aggressive attempt to change the values of students enrolled in this prestigious university and to introduce a fresh concept into the educational curriculum. Keio University is the oldest private university in Japan, founded by Fukuzawa Yukichi in 1858, and has become known as a leading institute in Japanese

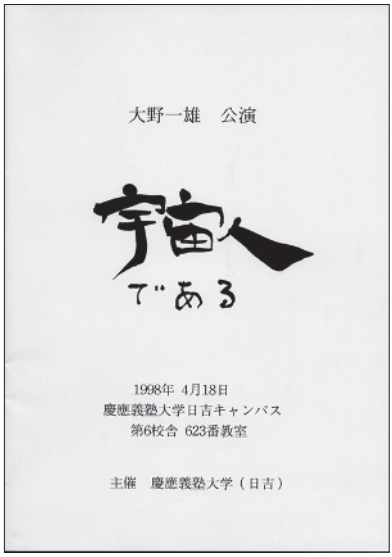


***The Ohno Kazuo's World* (1996)**



***The Universe and the Body* (1997)**

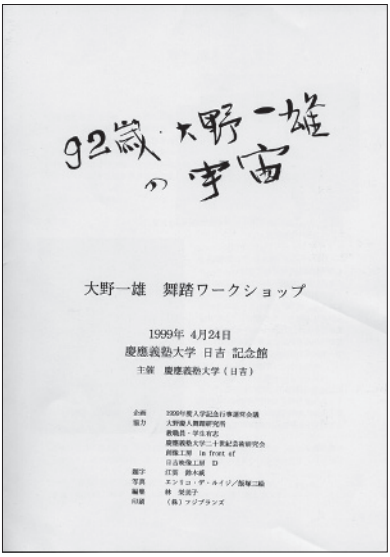
higher education. The alumni include three Japanese prime ministers and many prominent corporate leaders. Keio's mission clearly states, "Keio University is not merely a place for academic pursuit. Its mission is to be a constant source of honorable character and a paragon of intellect and morals for the entire nation and for each member to apply this spirit to elucidate the essence of family, society, and nation. They will not only articulate this essence in words, but also demonstrate it in their actions, and by so doing make Keio a leader of society" (Keio University, "The Mission of Keio University"). On the other hand, Keio alumni are generally regarded as smart, adroit, and tactful enough to be business people, and, therefore, some criticize the present composition of the university curriculum and suggest its atmosphere could be said to follow the "banking concept of education" as Paulo Freire says. According to Freire's, "the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposit" and they become people "who are filed away through the

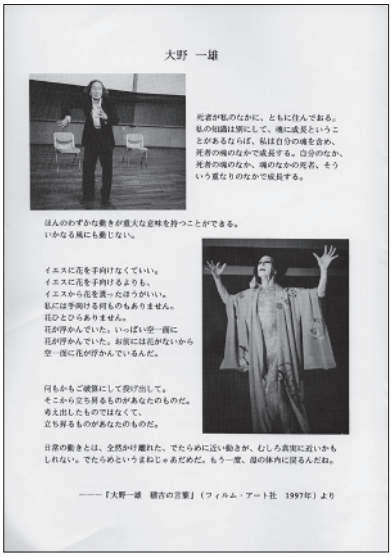


***A Person of the Universe* (1998)**

lack of creativity, transformation, and knowledge in this (at best) misguided system" (Freire, 53).

What then could Ohno's Butoh do to free students from such a "banking system" of education? If "knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable" in a present system that would nullify "education and knowledge as processes of inquiry," it can surely be said that a free and spontaneous sprit should be introduced, and, therefore, Ohno's method should be a driving force in changing these preoccupations as the essence of Ohno's Butoh is "freedom" based on philosophical and emotional sentiments connected with anti-establishment aestheticism. For example, in his workshop, Ohno gave dancers an assignment that they should face and confront a figure in an imaginary portrait on the wall with such means as a pantomime or Butoh. Students would be completely embarrassed when Ohno would say that they could assume the figure is Adolph Hitler and confront him. Eventually, dancers would say, "We cannot do anything on such a sudden request." According to Ohno they felt as if they had been thrown in the ocean of freedom (*The Palace Soars through the Sky: Kazuo Ohno on Butoh*, 27–8). As this episode shows, Ohno sees unprepared improvisation in dance as a way of going outside their own shelter in everyday life. Incidentally to say, he said the twenty minutes of improvisational dance experience beyond himself at this workshop was the greatest moment in his life when his assistant Yoshito suddenly played an album

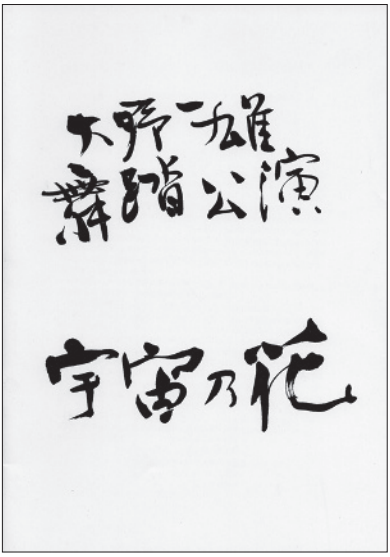




***Ohno Kazuo's Universe at 92* (1999)**

by Vanilla Fudge (*The Palace Soars through the Sky: Kazuo Ohno on Butoh,* 29). He thought it better that dancers not stand as if ready to take on any comers but relax and present themselves slowly, resting in order to be able to accept any situation and body movement without any preoccupation.

Ohno's Butoh is quite different from Hijikata's Butoh from the standpoint of this "freedom." In terms of teaching methodology, Hijikata started "Butoh with *Butoh-fu*" (Butoh with Butoh notation) from the early years of the 1970s. He quit the stage in 1973 and afterwards concentrated on the choreography and arrangement of dances until his death. On the other hand, Ohno's performances are fundamentally solo pieces and essentially improvised movements with the strong character of "event-ness." Accordingly, Ohno has fewer disciples and followers than Hijikata in spite of his many workshops and longer life. Ohno's unique interpretation of the popular definition of Butoh from Hijikata Tatsumi shows Ohno's adverse attitude to controlled techniques. Hijikata stated,



***Flower of the Universe* (2000)**

"Butoh is a dead body risking its life by planting its feet firmly on the ground," while Ohno responded that "His answer might lead you to conclude that Butoh is a dance form that transcends all techniques" (*Kazuo Ohno's World :From Without and Within,* 219). Relevant to this point are Ohno's following remarks: "Regardless of how technically proficient you become, you'll never touch us with something you don't genuinely feel in the first place" (*Kazuo Ohno's World :From Without and Within,* 209).

The other important difference between the Butohs of Ohno and Hijikata are their basic attitudes to gentleness in regard to neighbors. Ohno's generosity and meekness are more appropriate for new students emerging from the ordeal of highly competitive entrance exams. Although both of them have the power to resist any authority and to negate "domesticated bodies," Hijikata directed a destructive power toward institutionalized culture and society as presented in his *The Rebellion of the Body* in 1968, while Ohno set great value on human ties as shown in his words: "The role of raising children isn't confined exclusively to fathers and mothers. Given that we coexist with millions of others on this planet, it's not only mothers and fathers, it's not just our immediate parents who are responsible for bringing us up…Lately, I've been thinking quite a bit about [the] origins of my dance. While it sometimes strikes me that there are certain sequences I can create by myself, the fact of the matter is that I can't really work

out anything on my own. I'm continually being aided by others" (*Kazuo Ohno's World :From Without and Within,* 290).

We have seen why Ohno's Butoh has worked outside of theatres and particularly in the educational field. In sum, in addition to relaxing the high tensions of freshmen students, the performance leads to a basic attitude of freedom from any preoccupations and a feeling of gentleness toward their own environment. Ohno's Butoh, moreover, doesn't need any special training and techniques, though of course it's another matter if one wishes to become a professional Butoh dancer. The essential concepts of Ohno's Butoh have more important effects and impacts on amateur audiences compared to the techniques of body movements, as these are students who have not had any Butoh experience or any experience for that matter in the performing arts. If this is the true significance of Butoh, it may be argued that Butoh is neither confined within permanent theatres nor categorized into modern dance but is a performance style based on philosophical and emotional sentiments connected with anti-establishment aestheticism as its basic value.[2)]

Butoh performances in the Hiyoshi campus of Keio University have been carried on until now by many leading Butoh dancers such as Ohno Yoshito, Kasai Akira, Bishop Yamada, Nakajima Natsu, Kobayashi Saga, Yuki Yuko, Murobushi Koh, Waguri Yukio, Yamamoto Moe, Iwana Masashi, and Nagaoka Yuri. In 2019, Uesugi Mitsuyo, who has been in Ohno Kazuo studio, will give a performance with Soga Masaru and Tada Masami at the freshmen students festival. Part of the essential value of Butoh on the university campus has been recognized by virtue of this project. It is, however, still an unsettled question as to what the definition and the possibilities of Butoh are, so our educational and

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2) Kasai Akira has a similar notion about Butoh, calling Butoh the "art of the spirit," as well as the art of the body, including classical ballet and traditional Japanese dance as forms of Butoh (Kasai, 60 and 62).

experimental projects ignited by Professor Isao Hada, therefore, are still ongoing.

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This article was supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number 16K02326, Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (C).