Hijikata Tatsumi

Plucking off the Darkness of the Flesh

an interview by Shibusawa Tatsuhiko

1. Bar Gibbon, a membership club that Hijikata created for friends and others at Asbestos Hall, failed because he joined his "customers" in drinking freely. Left to Right: Shibusawa Tatsuhiko, an unidentified woman, and Hijikata Tatsumi. (Photo by Hosoe Eikō)

SHIBUSAWA: Your "dance of darkness" [*ankoku buyō*] is a philosophical statement of sorts, isn't it? When you read poetry or look at paintings, you're likely to say, "This is *butoh*." Does that mean that anything at all can be butoh?

HIJIKATA: That's right. After all, since ancient times solemn ceremonies have gone smoothly only with the help of dance. Paintings, too, are created by human beings and reveal their ultimate "butoh quality" [*butoh-sei*]. Really, it can be seen by anyone. But people stick to their own little world, their own particular genre and lose sight of it. Lots of people are now calling for an end to genres, but if they would just apply the idea of "butoh quality" to everything, the problem would be totally resolved.

SHIBUSAWA: It's a very basic problem that everyone seems to be forgetting about.

HIJIKATA: They forget it, then wallow in the indiscriminate use of the word

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"body." And in their works I can see devices to use the body for some actions. When I listen to people who express themselves through words talk about the "body," I'd have to say offhand there's not much that I can do for them. Butoh dancers have got to position their bodies so that no one is able to guess their next movement.

SHIBUSAWA: What do you mean by "use the body for some actions"?

HIJIKATA: It's what you see in Happenings or in the current *shingeki* [new theatre],[1] where the body is used as a kind of triggering device, which I find pretty questionable. And recently we again have those old-style health expositions, showing pictures of sick people and body parts. It's a way of romanticizing strangeness.

SHIBUSAWA: Why is it that traditional aspects of Japanese culture immediately tend to be romanticized?

HIJIKATA: Look at kabuki-style dance [*Nihon-buyō*]. It's dance puffed up with silk wadding. That kind of dance is completely cut off from the sacred domain where form consists only of shouts and cries. No one could teach me a dance like that of the sacred domain. As for Happenings, I don't like them because they lack precision. The participants claim to be precise but they aren't. Because there's no terror in what they do.

My father used to recite old ballad-dramas [*gidayu*], which he was lousy at, and beat my mother. To my child's eyes, he seemed to be measuring the length of each step he took before hitting her. Now that truly was terror. And, in effect, I played the role of a child actor in it, with the neighborhood watching from a distance. When my mom ran outside, the neighbors would comment on the pattern of her kimono. I played a serious part in things like this for 10 years.

SHIBUSAWA: Now, that was a real happening...

HIJIKATA: Yes, that really was a happening. And because of that experience I was, for a long time, unable to stage dance performances. Talking about my childhood makes me wonder what the world of a child really is. I don't think I've ever performed a children's dance that could be called childish or childlike. Even when it came to playthings, I'd do things like biting the toilet. I can't say why... I also used to slice at the water in the water jar with a sickle because I liked looking at the fissures I had made. Or I'd fiercely breathe in and out, making my body into a bellows. Any adults around would get nervous looking at me. Why on earth did I used to get so frenzied? It was probably because of living in the freezing north country of Tōhoku, where it was so cold that when you bent a finger it made a cracking sound. That's the kind of place, those are the things, that made me what I am.

SHIBUSAWA: So you think there's an essential connection between your dance and growing up in such a cold climate?

HIJIKATA: Yes, indeed. I have this desire inside me to hide my body somewhere very cold. So when the weather gets really cold, that's butoh. For example, when it's cold, you rub your hands together. You can take any part of the action out and it becomes dance.

SHIBUSAWA: Your intent seems to be the exact opposite of ordinary dance. Instead of extending the body lightly and rhythmically, you are always trying to clench it, to tighten it up. Did such kind of dance exist before you?

HIJIKATA: Not that I know of. Take, for example, swooning or fainting. I believe in a harmony that places such acts in the ultimate dance.

2. Ōno Kazuo (bottom) and Hijikata Tatsumi in Barairo dansu: A LA MAISON DE M. CIVEÇAWA *(Rose-colored Dance: To Mr. Shibusawa's House, 1965) choreographed by Hijikata at the Sennichidani kōkaidō Public Hall. (Photo by Hosoe Eikō)*

3. Barairo Dansu *(Rose-Colored Dance, 1965) choreographed by Hijikata Tatsumi at Sennichidani kōkaidō. Ōno Yoshito (left) and Kasai Akira. (Photo courtesy of Keiō gijuku University Art Center Archive)*

SHIBUSAWA: It's what Haniya Yutaka has cleverly termed "meditation in the womb." Which reminds me, all the dancers in your "dance of darkness" are men. Are women, then, too fleshy and round for it?[2]

HIJIKATA: A dancer must be able to relate to, for example, a frozen bone that transcends gender. Getting to that point, however, demands exhaustive examination, and without it the work will lapse into a trendy pseudo-darkness. In part, such a failure is doubtless a result of the times in which we live, but it's also because people have superficial perceptions of their own particular landscapes. Underground art turns into mere trendiness not because of external factors but because of the people who practice it. They create a desert around themselves, then complain there is no water. Why don't they try drinking from the wells within their own bodies? They should instead drop a ladder deep into their own bodies and climb down it. Let them pluck the

4. Barairo Dansu *(Rose-Colored Dance, 1965) choreographed by Hijikata Tatsumi at Sennichidani kōkaidō. A barber cuts the performers' hair onstage. From Left: unknown, Jōnouchi Motoharu, Kazekura Shō. (Photo by Hosoe Eikō)*

darkness from within their own bodies and eat it. But they always seek resolution from outside themselves.

SHIBUSAWA: Yet I believe that art should ultimately go underground and that underground art is a reaction to the abstractionism now in vogue. Abstractionism is, after all, what the upcoming World Expo is all about.[3]

HIJIKATA: And everyone is won over by the World Expo.

SHIBUSAWA: If there's any current art movement at all, the Expo is definitely its enemy. For the underground to survive, I think it must treat the World Expo as its worst enemy.

HIJIKATA: This may sound like a personal attack but the people who participate in the Expo are just following the going trend. When trends change, they change direction as easily as flipping the leaves of a calendar. Those idiotic producers, who all look like real estate brokers, disgust me. I've had it with them. I want nothing to do with such an offensive lot.

SHIBUSAWA: What do you think about Japanese criticism of the underground art movement here? Critics say the movement in Japan is half-baked, that the real underground is in the United States. Yet they never even try to deal seriously with you, the one who founded the Japanese underground.

HIJIKATA: I think things eaten in the dark taste good. Even now I eat sweets in bed in the dark. I can't see what they look like but I know they taste twice as good. Light, in general, sometimes seems indecent to me.

SHIBUSAWA: So you mean that ordinary dance is the dance of light rather than the dance of darkness. You started out doing classical ballet, and I've heard you were good at it. Is there any connection between it and your dance?

HIJIKATA: Not at all. There's no need to study classical ballet in order to dance the dance of darkness, but classical ballet is certainly better than what's called modern dance. When I seriously consider the training of a butoh dancer, I think that what's important are the kinds of movements which come from joints being displaced, then from walking disjointedly for a couple of steps, with one leg striving to reach the other.

SHIBUSAWA: Does a dancer then become an object of sorts?

HIJIKATA: That's right. And the object calls for a spirit, the spirit of the dancer, which means that a human being is transformed into something not human. Even in classical ballet there's a hierarchy: body in the middle, god above, and doll below. So a butoh dancer who parades his humanity ends up bested by a doll.

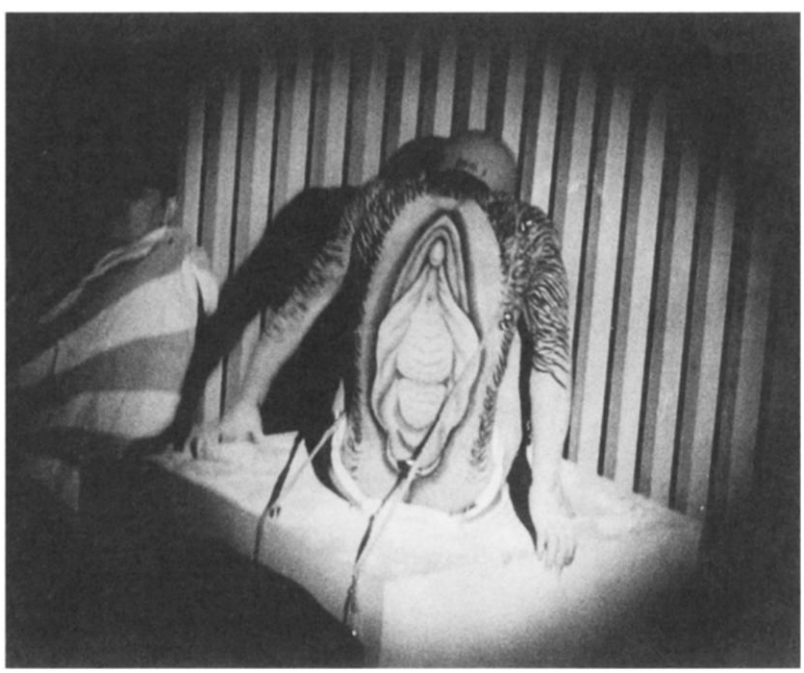
SHIBUSAWA: Your dance is often seen to be bizarre and grotesque, isn't it?

HIJIKATA: I used to listen a lot to the cock-and-bull stories my brothers told about things they'd seen in Harbin,[4] some of which they went to great lengths to make up. They weren't stories about spangled panties but about a handkerchief turning into a piece of flesh and stuff like that. There wasn't anything very excessive about the scenes in the stories. They had the eeriness of a silenced animal. Anyhow, painful training, like that which severely weakens the brain, has got to be valued. That's how you are able to grab hold of youthful grotesquery and a bit of something tender.

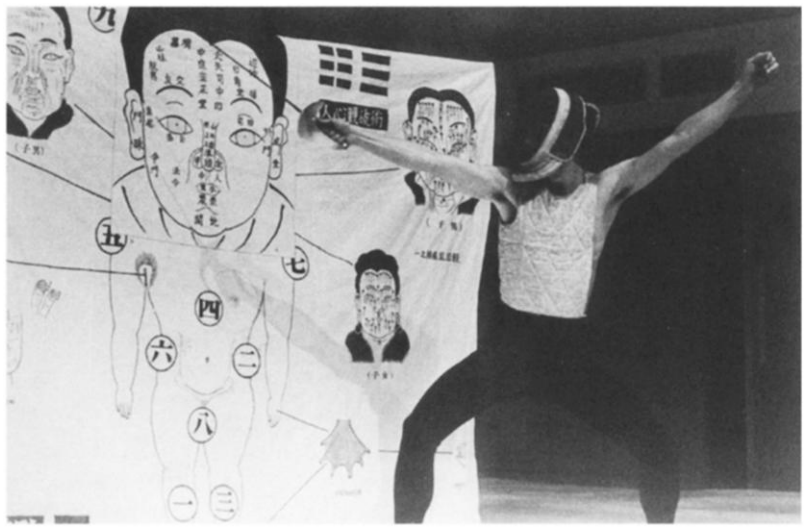
I like the spectacles put on by Shōkonsha.[5] Some, like their "human pump," are in the category of implements. Theirs is a unique world that proves you don't need grand entertainment to enjoy yourself. I think I've always been mad about implements. I love it when a human being almost becomes a thing or part of a human completely turns into a thing, for example, an artificial leg. My intuition tells me that the wolf boy[6] was the same.

SHIBUSAWA: You don't become an animal?

HIJIKATA: I do, but in that case I don't merely imitate the animal. What I want are the movements an animal shows to a child, not the ones it shows to an adult. Take a dog, for instance. How it moves when playing with a child is totally unlike how it moves when playing with grown-ups like us. To get to that point you've got to become a single piece of bone.

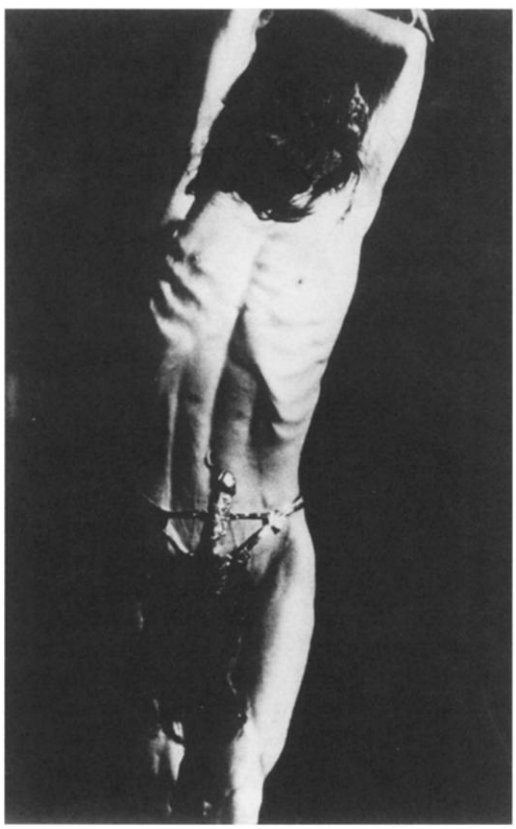


5. Barairo Dansu *(Rose-Colored Dance, 1965)* choreographed by Hijikata Tatsumi at Sennichidani kōkaidō. *A vagina is painted on the back of dancer Tamano Kōichi. (Photo by Nakatani Tadao)*



6. Barairo Dansu *(Rose-Colored Dance, 1965) choreographed by Hijikata Tatsumi at Sennichidani kōkaidō. An unidentified dancer fences in front of a fortune-telling chart. (Photo by Hosoe Eikō)*

7. Hijikata Tatsumi in Hijikata Tatsumi to Nihonjin: Nikutai no hanran *(Hijikata Tatsumi and the Japanese: Rebellion of the Body, 1968) at the Nihon seinen kan Hall. (Photo by Nakatani Tadao)*



SHIBUSAWA: That's a fundamental desire for transformation.

HIJIKATA: That's it. Besides, I've often had the experience of becoming other than myself. Going back to talk of my childhood again, there was a straw basket, called an *izume*, that was used as a cradle for toddlers. You were seated in the cradle and left in the middle of a rice paddy all day long, from morning to night. No matter how you scream and cry, you can never reach the grown-ups who are working. You urinate and defecate and of course a puddle forms on the bottom of the cradle. You cry and cry and everything goes black and you lose consciousness. Maybe you dream. Constantly alternating between sleeping and waking, you no longer know what's happening. Then, when you're taken out of the cradle, your legs are all cramped up and you can't move and that's how you're set down on the roadside. I had no master, after all, to teach me my first steps in dance. My influences came from those childhood experiences, the trees and icicles I saw then, and from my father.

SHIBUSAWA: But the young people who come to study with you have different experiences from yours.

HIJIKATA: Yes, so everyone of course has a slightly different objective. That's why I think individuality is important. Individuality is the overflow to the outside. But everyone has a body, and I prod them about it. I might remark that a body is a pitiful thing or comment on the shape of someone's head. I start off in a roundabout way, then get more and more to the point. By deftly touching them, I hope to share common elements with them.

SHIBUSAWA: I'd like to ask about the performance you have coming up in June.[7]

HIJIKATA: We're already rehearsing for it. I strongly feel that I've reached the age when I must definitely do Hijikata Tatsumi by Hijikata Tatsumi. But I have absolutely no gut feeling about how to live my life. That is to say, I don't have a vision.

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Translators' Notes

1. A new theatre movement, *shingeki*, started in Japan in 1906. Its purpose was to create a modern, Westernized theatre, with emphasis on dramatic literature and realistic style in contrast to traditional Japanese theatre.
2. Shibusawa refers here to an earlier belief held by Hijikata. In July 1967 Hijikata directed a recital for Takai Tomiko, a female disciple, and in August 1968 he directed one for Ashikawa Yōko. This interview was conducted during a transitional period for Hijikata.
3. Shibusawa refers to the 1970 World Expo held in Osaka.
4. Harbin (now written Haerbin) is the capital of Heilungkiang province in northeastern China. It used to be the center of Manchuria.
5. Shōkonsha [shrines for inviting souls] were special shinto shrines originally established in various areas for *samurai* warriors who lost their lives supporting the emperor against the Tokugawa shogunate around the time of the Meiji Restoration (1868). The shrines were later dedicated to soldiers who died in the Russo-Japanese war and Manchurian Incident. In 1939 the Japanese government renamed the shrines gokoku jinja (shrines for protecting the nation). The exact reference here is obscure.
6. Hijikata refers here to the wolf boy of Avignon, made famous in the Truffaut film, *The Wild Child* (1969).
7. In June 1968 Hijikata performed in *Ojune sho* (Excerpts from Genet), a recital by his disciple Ishii Mitsutaka. Hijikata danced Hanayome (neko) (Bride [Cat]) wearing a kimono, and Kirisuto (Christ). He developed these solos into scenes in *Nikutai no hanran* (Rebellion of the Body), in October of the same year.

Shibusawa Tatsuhiko *(1928–1987) was a scholar of French literature and a literary critic. He translated the writings of the Marquis de Sade as well as contemporary French literature. Throughout his life, he examined the demonic aspect of human beings. His writings earned him a cult following.*