

Creative absences¹

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ABSTRACT

Seeking to affirm life as a feature of "empty space," Alfred North Whitehead points to life as a process of "between," in which process-thinking sees all reality as an interconnected whole. This means that a "living society" is one that includes some "living occasions" that flow through the void. For the Hijikata Tatsumi butoh the empty state comprises the pre-movement. The body in the butoh is always process, unfinished, perishable, and indistinct of gender and the place where it is and eternally in crisis. Both his ambivalence and his absences are part of his construction and make it unique. The butoh consists precisely in dancing a life with a void. In his work *Sick Dancer*, we find insects, fungi, a description of small sensations of everything that touched or penetrated the body of his childhood. However, its purpose is not only to describe micropayments and micromovements or their childhood memories, but also to restore the genesis of dance, which is the process itself of life and death. It is not coincidence that he mingles with the sick, the disabled, or the women. Hijikata seeks to reach an abstract dimension that enlarges the senses and where the feelings are transformed. Considering Whitehead's theory of feeling, in which we respond to things in the first place, feeling them and only then identifying and recognizing them. Or, what emotions do not cause bodily states, but rather, bodily states come first, and emotions emerge from them. How, a philosophy of the body, the immediate experience that look into the seeing eye and the hand it touches, as Hijikata has taught us, is the only possible justification for any thought? Its starting point is nothing more than the analytical observation of the components of that experience, the emotions themselves. Life and death, absence and presence, light and shadow, the exhausted body, the fragility as an engine, is nothing more than the fragility sought to dance life containing the void.

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Keywords: processual thought, theory of feeling, Alfred North Whitehead, butoh, Hijikata

RESUMO

Buscando afirmar a vida como uma característica do “espaço vazio”, Alfred North Whitehead aponta a vida como um processo do “entre”, no qual o pensamento processual vê toda a realidade como um todo interconectado. Isso significa que uma “sociedade viva” é aquela que inclui algumas “ocasiões vivas” que fluem através do vazio. Para o butô de Hijikata Tatsumi o estado de vazio compreende o pré-movimento. O corpo no butô é sempre processo, inacabado, perecível, indistinto de gênero e do lugar onde está e eternamente em crise. Tanto sua ambivalência como suas ausências fazem parte da sua construção e o torna único. O butô consiste exatamente em dançar uma vida comportando um vazio. Em seu trabalho *Dançarina Doente* encontramos insetos, fungos, uma descrição de pequenas sensações de tudo o que tocava ou penetrava o corpo da infância. Porém, seu propósito não é apenas o de descrever micropaisagens e micromovimentos ou suas memórias de infância, mas também restituir a gênese da dança, que é o próprio processo de vida e morte. Não é por acaso que ele se mistura aos doentes, pessoas deficientes, ou as mulheres. Hijikata busca alcançar uma dimensão abstrata que amplie os sentidos e onde os sentimentos se transformem. Considerando a teoria do sentir de Whitehead, de que nós respondemos às coisas em primeiro lugar, sentindo-as e somente depois identificando-as e reconhecendo-as. Ou, que emoções não causam estados corporais, mas antes, os estados corporais vêm em primeiro lugar, e as emoções surgem deles. De que modo, uma filosofia do corpo, a experiência imediata que investiga o olho que vê e a mão que toca, como nos ensinou Hijikata, é a única justificativa possível para qualquer pensamento? Seu ponto de partida nada mais é do que a observação analítica dos componentes dessa experiência, as próprias emoções. Vida e morte, ausência e presença, luz e sombra, o corpo esgotado, a fragilidade como motor, nada mais é do que a fragilidade procurada para dançar a vida comportando o vazio.

Palavras chave: Pensamento Processual, teoria dos sentires, Alfred North Whitehead, butô, Hijikata

1. Prelude or first step

The step or initial inspiration for this essay, more than an article, has as its generating movement the prospective experience of a thought established in the

body of a woman, philosopher and dancer, or philosopher and dancer who daily dances creative absences.

The questions that have always guided my philosophical research throughout my journey have been permeated by experience as a woman in the world and as a dancer. It is, therefore, experiencing these feelings that I will make a parallel between the *butoh* and Whitehead's thought in order to talk a little about the experience of being a woman as a creative absence, as an experience of emptiness.

I chose the *butoh* of Tatsumi Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno, because both, even if their bodies are identified as masculine, propose to experience different bodily states, among them, the feminine. Hijikata with "The Sick Dancer"³ and Kazuo as "The Argentina"⁴.

First, for those who do not know the *butoh*. *Butoh* is a dance that emerged in postwar Japan. Created by Tatsumi Hijikata in the 1950s, *butoh* is also inspired by the *avant-garde* movements, expressionism, surrealism, constructivism, among others and Japanese dances, such as *No* and *Bugaku*, to inspire them to create their own art. Together with him, Kazuo Ohno intensely dedicated his old age to the promotion of *butoh* Japan and the world. Although this art form is known to "resist fixity" and being difficult to define, the *butoh* is known as the dance of grotesque and darkness (Waychoff, 2014, p.189). Following the subversive aesthetics of those *avant-garde* art movements, *Butoh* seeks a form of expression that is not necessarily choreographed nor bound by stereotyped movements that refer to a specific technique. *Butoh* is concerned with expressing the individuality of the *butoh* dancer, without masks and allegory veils; expressing what the human being really has in his soul, in his spirit, even if it reveals what may be the most sordid, lonely and dark inside the dancer.

Butoh is not only performance, but also the personification of one of the most precise critical spirits in the history of body consciousness, with a force of thought that deeply impresses the history of the human spirit. As pointed Kazuko Kuniyoshi (1990, p. 87):

³ "The Sink Dancer" (2005) is the last work of Tatsumi Hijikata, written at a time when he was no longer dancing. In the text, the author talks about the relationship between life and the human trajectory, bringing up his memories through poems, loose narratives, and choreographic notations. The work has not yet been translated into Portuguese due to its high complexity. Although we found a good translation of some passages in the book *Hijikata Tatsumi - Pensar um corpo esgotado* (2018), in which Kuniichi Uno, a Japanese philosopher, whose work and research pursues delineations of the body in dance and philosophy, offers us interesting approximations of the path of Hijikata.

⁴ At the age of 71, he presents his first solo, choreographed by Hijikata Tatsumi, "La Argentina Sho" (Admirando La Argentina, Admirando La Argentina) based on the show that so marked him in his youth. Divided into five pictures Birth and Death, Everyday Pain, Marriage of Heaven and Earth, Tangos and Final, and Thanks.

Wasn't this deep level of physical existence that Hijikata was aiming for? Didn't Hijikata consider *ankoku butoh* as a force that acted intensely in this region of physical sensitivity, which incorporates the most conservative elements of the right to birth? The problem is not Tohoku's cold weather, but a force that works directly on the body's foundations. Disturbances deep within the body and subconscious have echoes that affect not just the flesh, but the whole being, and some might startle enough to keep their eyes wide open.

More than an artistic genre, the experience of *butoh* "destabilizes assumptions about human conscience, the relationship between life and death and the position of man in relation to nature, culture and inanimate objects." (Greiner, 2005, p. 54)

2. Life as "empty space"

Whitehead points the life as a process of "between," in which process thought sees all reality as an interconnected whole. This means that a "living society" is one that includes some "living occasions" that flow through the emptiness.

What is characteristic of a living society is the interweaving of a complex structure of inorganic societies, producing a non-social nexus characterized by the intense physical experiences of its members. But such an experience derives from the complex order of the material animal body and not from the simple "personal order" of past occasions, with similar experiences. The intense experience produced is free from the obstacles arising from the reiteration of the past. This is the condition of spontaneity in the conceptual reaction. The conclusion to be drawn from this argument is that life is a characteristic of "empty space" and not of the space "occupied" by a corpuscular society. (Whitehead, 1978, p.105)

Emptiness, as a status of the body, presents itself mainly as an aesthetic experience, in which thoughts about perceptions, worlds, and new connections are possible. Space-time of events, creation, agency, and experimentation of the unpredictable, the chance to become a living performance.

However, how to experience life as "empty space"?

For me, *butoh*⁵ dancing is one of the ways to experience this empty space. Thus, I intend to show how *butoh* presents itself as a practical and theoretical way to

⁵ *Butoh* is an art form known for "resisting fixity" [1], it is known as the dance of gothic and darkness. Tatsumi Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno, following the aesthetics of arts that had as its proposal the subversion of conventions, characteristically assumed by the *avant-garde*, *Butoh* seeks a form of expression that is not necessarily choreographed nor bound by stereotyped movements that refer to a specific technique. *Butoh* is concerned with expressing the individuality of the *butoh* dancer, without masks and allegory veils; expressing what the human being really has in his soul, in his spirit, even if it reveals what may be the most sordid, lonely and dark inside the dancer.

understand Whitehead's proposal of process thought. As an example of what I'm talking about, I choose Minako Suki⁶ *Human Form's* butoh performance.

First, for butoh, like much of Japanese aesthetics, the word *Ma* is understood as a space in between, in which we experience different possibilities, when we inhabit the space between one breath and another. According to Arata Isozaki (Japanese architect): "An empty place where all kinds of phenomena appear, pass and disappear, where various phenomena arrangement symbols and highly elastic forms emerge." Or as the musician Teiji Itoh (1978) defines: "a space in flux."

間

MA (between space)⁷

Ma (間)⁸, is a Japanese word that can mean "interval", "in between", "space", "time" or "distance between two structural parts", passage, pause, non-action, silence. *Ma* is a joint notion⁹ or idea of space and time or an interval between two actions or events, or also a spatial void; a spatial concept characterized by immateriality; it is the experiential place understood as an emphasis on the interval. *Ma* organizes the process of moving from one place to another. What we can also

⁶ Minako Seki is one of the pioneers of butoh in Europe. In 1987 she settles in Berlin, where together with Delta Ra'i and Yumiko Yoshioka they create the first Japanese-German Tatoeba-Théâtre Danse Grotesque company. For the past 20 years she has been developing her method (seki) which is a kind of holistic mindfulness practice whereby the observation and concrete experience of basic physical principles about one's own body must be made tangible. This method combines different languages, in dance, theater, therapeutic exercises, motor therapy, as well as Yoga, Tàiji Quán and Qigong. Seki performance can be watch at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NyF9DjNbT5U>

⁷ "*Ma* is a Japanese word that expresses an idea for which some meanings converge. It is written 間 and, like almost most ideograms, has plural readings - *Ma*, *Aida* or *Kan* - and encompasses semantics like "between-space", "Intermediate space", "interval", among others." (OKANO, 2013-2014)

⁸ 間 = 門 + 日

The ideogram *Ma* derived from the character 門 ("door") and 日 ("sun"). Earlier variants of the word *ma* were written with the kanji for "moon" (月), ostensibly depicting "A door through the crevice of which the moonshine peeps in" (Karlgrén, Bernhard. *Analytic Dictionary of Chinese and Sino-Japanese*. Organized by Paul Geunthner, 1923, p. 130.

⁹ According to Michiko Okano in his article "*Ma* - the aesthetics of "between", *Ma* cannot be called a concept, as it does not understand a logical construction, but a notion or an idea: "Governed by a relational logic, this The word is presented in different ways, according to the associations that are established in space and time. It is an expression of something close to Japanese common sense: everyone knows what it is but cannot explain it exactly. It is a delicate task, therefore, to conceptualize, in an understandable way for the West, a notion that manifests itself, for example, in the pauses of speech in a conversation, considering that, in the Western scope, logic is governed by duality." (OKANO, 2013-2014, p. 150)

understand as a space for listening, listening to territories. Attentive listening to the gaps that appear in the spaces and may show deviations to be covered.

According to Okano *Ma* is governed by a relational logic, non-dualist, that is manifested, for example, in the pauses of speech in a conversation. Contrary to what we learned in the West, through Aristotle logic based on the principle of identity and non-contradiction, *Ma*'s study comprises exactly knowing the space of the third party excluded from such a system. *Ma* inhabits the contradictory and simultaneous space, that is, it inhabits both what is "one and the other" or "neither one nor the other". And therefore,

This character of the possibility, potential, and ambivalence present in *Ma* creates a peculiar aesthetic that implies the valorization, for example, of the white space not drawn on paper, of the non-action time of a dance, of the silence of the musical time, as well as of the spaces that are situated in the intermediation of the internal and external, the public and the private, the divine and the profane or the times that inhabit the past and the present, life and death. (Okano, 2013-2014, p. 151)

Ma offers an available environment, initially empty, for possible action. As spatial movement, it is the place where a process is built, a spatiality in a movement that necessarily involves space and time, dialogues with the chance, and has as a consequence something always unfinished, open to participation and to eternal complements.

This empty space comprises a space of openness and availability for something to happen, regardless of its implementation. It is important to note that the association with the "emptiness" present in *Ma* is distinct from the Western conception whose meaning is nothingness. The emptiness of *Ma* makes the appearance and generation of the new possible. This distinct understanding of the void has been present in Chinese culture since the Book of Changes (*I Ching*) and has accompanied both Taoist and Confucian philosophy. "Laozi and Zhuangzi associated the origin of the universe with *wu* 無 (nothing) and used *xu* 空 (emptiness) when the original state qualified."¹⁰ (Okano, 2013-2014, p.151) Emptiness would be the way to reach fullness:

[...] emptiness, stillness, detachment, insipidity, silence, inaction, are the level of balance of the universe, the perfection of the way and of virtue. For this reason, the sovereign and the saint always remain at rest. This rest leads to the void that is fullness, the fullness that is totality. (our translation, Zhuangzi apud Cheng, 2012, p. 92).¹¹

¹⁰ To learn more about *Ma*, especially to understand the notion of emptiness according to Taoism, I recommend reading the careful research by MICHIKO OKANO.

¹¹ "[...] el vacío, la quietud, el desapego, la insipidez, el silencio, la inacción, son el nivel del equilibrio del universo, la perfección de la vía y de la virtud. Por ello, el soberano y el santo permanecen siempre en

So, just as Whitehead asserts, this emptiness, this “enter” process, which is life, is the place where anything can happen, everything can be created.

3. Dance the life sustaining the emptiness

For Hijikata Tatsumi's *butoh*, the state of emptiness comprises pre-movement. The body in the *butoh* is always a process, unfinished, perishable, indistinct of gender and where it is and forever in crisis. Both its ambivalence and its absences are parts of its construction and make it unique.

As we can see in the *Human Form*, Minako Seki examines objects or entities, which can take on human form. The investigation begins with the human body and extends to puppets, robots, corpses and incorporeal spirits or ghosts. She experiences the laws of the body in space. For example, the effects of gravity - falling, hanging, flowing - aimed at an open and sensitive perception of one's own body.

Thus, the *butoh* consists just about dancing a life sustaining emptiness. In his book *Sick Dancer*, present in his *Complete Works* (2005) we find insects, fungi, a description of small sensations of everything that touched or penetrated the body of childhood. Its purpose is not only to describe micro-landscapes and micromovements or their childhood memories, but also to restore the genesis of dance, which is the very process of life and death.

The same way as *Ma* is space in between, creative absences are constituted by listening to emptiness, that which is physically absent, but which emerges as the instigator of a process, unfinished, perishable, indistinct from the place where it is and eternally in crisis of identity. Such as the construction of the feminine, which constitutes an experimentation of emptiness. Construction of an identity that is process and not limited to a defined instantiation. It is space-time in flux, where ambivalence is part of its construction, making unique the experience that often precludes a fixed definition and makes it unique.

Its starting point is nothing more than the analytical observation of the components of this experience, the emotions themselves. Life and death, absence and presence, light and shadow, the exhausted body, the fragility as a motor, is nothing but the fragility sought to dance the life sustaining the emptiness.

Dance is one of the “living occasions” that flow through the void and the *butoh* was constituted, not only a mere response to the stimulus, but where one

reposito. Este reposo conduce al vacío que es plenitud, la plenitud que es totalidad.” (Zhuangzi apud Cheng, 2012, p. 92).

experiences a reaction adapted to the capture of intensity, in a wide variety of circumstances.

As Whitehead states, it is possible to think of life as a characteristic of "empty space", life as a peek through the cellular interstices, life as a process of "between", life as a flow through the gaps in biological tissues and structures cells, their decomposition and their constant process of life and death. The life that houses the past and the time of a future-now lived in *Ma*, in the creative absence.

In Hijikata's Butoh, this dance takes place when the dancer mingles with the sick, the disabled people and the women. In Minako Seki's performance the proposal is to blur the boundaries between human and artificial bodies. The human body, which is merely a puppet, is stripped only in its form in order to reach the threshold space between physicality and artificiality. Who is in control of the puppet body? Is a disembodied human form just another piece of useless object? How to embody the human, the feminine, the life?

The search or the encounter is the place of creative absences capable of reaching an abstract dimension that broadens the senses and where feelings are transformed.

4. Broadening the Senses and Where the Feelings Transform themselves

Feeling for Whitehead is capture and appropriation, a form of subjectivity that enhances it. Feeling like "a mere technical term" is practically equivalent to what Whitehead calls prehension. Positive and negative holds are how any entity can use the process of responding to other preceding entities.¹²

Feeling¹³ is a positive prehension in contrast to the negative prehension, a way in which things are not felt, but "eliminated from feeling." So, with each encounter, you either feel whatever you have found or rejects actively. We respond to things first by feeling them, and it is only after we identify and recognize what we feel. The feelings do not cause body states, but rather, body states come first, and emotions arise from them. This is why we say that the butoh is the dance of the dead body. It is neither voluntary nor involuntary movements, but the experimentation of bodily states, the circulation of passing feelings. There is no representation of movements as in most dances. What matters is to experience physical or abstract

¹² An entity grasps, or feels, an entire previous entity: meaning the entity as a whole, rather than just its particular qualities. I see a tree, not just an aggregation of green (leaf) and gray points.

¹³ In what follows, I will use the terms 'feeling', 'emotion' and 'affection' in a practically interchangeable manner. This is in keeping with Whitehead's own use. Nevertheless, I remain aware of Brian Massumi's (2002) crucial distinction between affection and emotion (27-28). For Massumi, affection is primary, unconscious, subjective or presumed, significant, disqualified, and intensive; whereas emotion is derived, conscious, qualified and meaningful, a "content" that can be attributed to an already constituted subject.

states, in which feelings arise from the experimentation of these states, such as the robot body, puppet body, or the body-woman, body-trans.

Although the *butoh* is called the dance of death, the experience of death does not imply death as absent or the end of everything, on the contrary, the *butoh* seeks to experience the moment when the body enters the process of putrefaction. Moments of emptiness that open up to experience physical sensations.

For Whitehead, life does not require conscience. As for that dead body that still lives, it comprises physical and conceptual personalities that indicate a dance of 'the organism', not a dance representing the organism as dead. The experience of the corpse does not depend on "critical awareness", but on "non-awareness", the abandonment of logocentric representational logic. The dead body's power is "to be alive".

The basis of the experience is *perceptive*. Feelings are the channel for this flow, for the link between what came before and what comes after (past and future). For Whitehead, feelings are like vectors; capture of some elements in the universe as components in the actual internal constitution of its subject. The elements are the initial data; they are what the feeling feels. But they are felt under an abstraction. A feeling can be described in terms of its creation process, a process that involves negative prehensions that eliminate the effect in which the initial data is felt under a "perspective" that is the objective data of the feeling. And therefore,

(..) in this process, the subjective form is created that integrates your own story into feeling, transformed into the way you feel it. The way the feeling feels translates the way the feeling came into existence. It translates the purpose that propelled him forward, the obstacles he encountered, and the indeterminations that were dissolved due to the subject's creative decisions. (Whitehead, 1978, p. 264).

The *butoh* experience constituted itself as a *perceptive operator* that destabilized assumptions about human consciousness, the relationship between life and death, and the position of man in relation to nature, culture, and inanimate objects. As Greiner (2005, p. 56) said, "the body in the *butoh* is always an unfinished, perishable process, indistinguishable from where it is and forever in an identity crisis. The body that dances *butoh* implodes the clear notion of individuality but has ambivalences." *Butoh*'s body is permeable to environments where he struggles to survive and presents himself in a unique way, breaking the hierarchy and differentiation with inanimate objects in the world.

Butoh dance is a life experience and not just a technique and repertoire of movements for creating gestures. *Butoh* recognizes the autonomy of a hand, a shoulder, the viscera, the belly, as the subject of himself and where each one has separate, sometimes opposite roles, in the relationship between them, each part of

the body is autonomous and, often, also interchangeable. This butoh training experience is found in the obsessive repetition of simple actions and everyday movements. For Hijikata, for example, "All actions must, therefore, comply with an execution without necessarily bending the joints, just getting used to their possibilities. In this way, the entire body can become a deadly weapon to make a specific move. As if all the tendons were broken at the same time, making a sound accompaniment." (Greiner, 2005, 73)

However, a simple physical feeling is the most primitive type of an act of perception, devoid of consciousness:

It is not a conscious perception, because the subjective form of a simple physical feeling does not imply awareness, except when it is acquired in subsequent stages of integration. In practice, it seems, at least in relation to human beings, that only the transmuted feelings acquire some awareness, never the simple physical feelings. Consciousness originates in the upper phases of integration and illumination with the greatest clarity and clarity. (Whitehead, 1978, p. 269)

Finally, in his play *Antai* (obscure body), Hijikata explores different cutouts of the body, especially the "obscure part" that is not related to any specific part of the body but where one experiences "(..) consciousness and recognition that not everything that happens in the body is controlled by the mind and that the time of the shadows is like the negative of the clarification of logic." (Greiner, 2005, 47). In *Antai*, Hijikata experiences contrast, inversion, and collision between things in order to incite the body to face the crises that inhabit it. With the movements that arise from this experience, he seems to expose the body in order to reveal something obscure, in order to dive deeper and deeper into the body, maintaining its otherness.

It is therefore, this way that butoh is the immediate experience that investigates the seeing eye and the touching hand, as Hijikata taught us, the only possible justification for any thought and construction of oneself and life. In which process thought sees all reality as an interconnected whole, emphasizing the ultimate meaning of the forward flow of time and the change of those things that exist in time. The emphasis on time as an integral part of existence means that process thought regards life as consisting of events or, as the philosopher William James (1842-1910) would say, "drops" of experience whose character is established by the way in which one becomes. What may seem to be solid matter is really a dance of energy events and interconnections.

Dance that is creative absence, life as an "empty space" created at each interval, between space-time, which awaits new experiments in order to continue

flow. As Ohno said in one of his workshops in Kamihoshikawa, a suburb of the city of Yokohama:

After a certain point, life and death come together. I was alive a while ago, now I'm going to death. As I always say, I contemplate a flower and think it is beautiful. So I go down a ladder, a ladder to the world of death. The world of the flower is the world of death. I contemplate the flower. Souls sympathize, bodies unite, I forget until I'm alive. I dance within death itself. Sometimes, in the world of death, when I perceive, the world of life. Life, death, life, death. (our translation, Ohno, 2016, p. 190)

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