

Intercorporeality:
Merleau-Ponty's Ontology of Flesh and Butoh Dance
Practice

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DECLARATION

I declare that the work presented in this thesis is my own.

Pawel Szykarczuk

ABSTRACT

This research project is interdisciplinary and intercultural. Broadly, it moves between the practices of phenomenology and dance in order to contribute in an original way to contemporary debates associated with a so-called 'somatic turn' in recent critical theory. Specifically, the project engages with the phenomenology/ontology of the late Merleau-Ponty, and with Butoh, a dance form that emerged in Japan in the late 1950s, having sources in Noh Theatre and Kabuki and western Expressionist Dance. What these practices bring to the broad contemporary debates concerning somatic/embodiment, in methodologically distinct ways, is a focus on intercorporeality; a phenomenon/experience/lived concept that, in Merleau-Ponty's later work, increasingly replaces earlier notions of intersubjectivity, thus decentering the western, epistemological concept of the (humanist) "subject" and emphasising instead an anonymous, pre-personal basis of existence.

The project as a whole draws largely on my own original research of an as yet largely un-researched constellation of source materials and practices. It also contributes to Merleau-Pontean scholarship by examining Merleau-Pontean ideas that have still not been fully exploited, and exploring possible relationships between this material and Eastern philosophical views of embodiment. A further important aspect of the originality of my work is its methodological approach as I also discuss issues of intercorporeality and the pre-personal experientially, through lived practice and interrogations of Butoh. Here, engagement with the intercorporeal/prepersonal is through processes of enactment and it is my own body that is the major instrument of data-collection. This methodological emphasis is important since a large part of Merleau-Ponty's later project was also centred on methodology, namely his ongoing search for appropriate philosophical 'instruments' and for a philosophical language able, paradoxically, to open up the realm of pre-reflexive/pre-linguistic being and learn from it.

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PREFACE

*

For the first seven years of my life I grew up in a small flat in the City of Gdansk in Poland. The flat was centrally located, surrounded by busy roads, trams and commercial centres. Surprisingly, there was also, in my neighbourhood, a wasteland; a mixture of overgrown allotments, a deserted sand quarry and some derelict buildings where abandoned dogs roamed. From the age of five when my younger brother was born and I stopped attending nursery, I explored this wilderness; often playing on my own, sometimes accompanied by vagabond dogs. I cut my way through the dense growth of summer weeds. My body and mind, flexible and open in equal measure, seemed readily disposed to abandoning my everyday persona of a human child. I imagined myself to be a dog or a wolf. This urban jungle became a topological space within which natural and human-made elements coexisted. In my later years, I would unearth its matrix: an analogue network of relationships between animate and inanimate elements, in the new places in which I came to live. They gave me a sense of grounding.

At the age of seven my family moved to a small town in an agricultural region of Poland. My new neighbourhood—then at an early stage of urban development—lay on the margins of the suburbs from which views of the countryside, with its fields and meadows, extended. I wandered off for miles to explore these new lands, inhabited mostly by chickens and cows but also wild rabbits, sparrow hawks, and deer. My sense of being surrounded by and also being in relationship with a sensuous, other-than-human-world was enforced.

As I grew older I began to carry out daily chores. An annual spring garden preparation was a reoccurring feature of my teenage years; regarded, I must admit, as a nuisance. The symbol of this task and the indispensable requisite for accomplishing it was a spade. When handed to me for first time by my father it was not well suited to my young, not yet strong enough body. At first the spade was just a tool—a cold, heavy object that I operated in a clumsy fashion in order to turn over the topsoil. But with time, and as I grew, it became an extension of my body, through which my strength poured unobstructed into the ground, in order to aerate it and make it ready

to receive the seeds from which vegetables would grow. Subsequently I became attentive to these elusive moments when, in the middle of everyday, mundane tasks, the boundaries between my body and things became ambiguous. The weight of objects, their texture, resistance or support retrieved them from the background of my daily circumspections, and made them stand out and assert their being. Unattractive—not to say boring—tasks such as turning over topsoil with a spade, cutting wood with an axe, or mopping the kitchen floor, unexpectedly revealed my body's ability to inhabit and become inhabited by these objects at first seemingly separate from me. The anonymity of these everyday objects and their sheer usefulness were suspended for a brief moment and what was allowed to come to the fore was the realisation that our relationship was reciprocal and, albeit differently, fundamental to both of us. My use of tools, while tending animals and growing vegetables on our small farm, contributed to my physical dexterity and the development of a wide-ranging repertoire of movement. These tools and many other artefacts, as well as natural objects, landscapes and elemental forces such as heavy rains, snowfalls or the heat of summer days, constituted the expansive horizon of my world.

I gained experiential insight into how my bodily engagement was intertwined with the demands and delights of responding to the world's natural cycles as well as to the challenges and satisfactions of caring for the household. But this early insight craved a conceptual refinement.

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It is no doubt therefore that years later when, during the course of my M.A. degree in philosophy I came into contact with the ideas of Martin Heidegger as expressed in *Being and Time* (1927), my interests were reignited. In the first instance, it was his quest for an ontological description of the human being (*Dasein*) that indicated to me that the sphere of the everyday was a proper field of philosophical investigation. In this sphere, named *being-in-the-world*, the intimacy between *Dasein* and the world came to the fore. The natural mode of existence of the things termed *present-at-hand* and their transformation in the mode of *ready-to-hand* implied an embodied relationship between *Dasein* and its environment (*Umwelt*). And although Heidegger ultimately relegated embodiment to a margin of his

analyses of *Dasein*, his writing confirmed to me the knowledge I had implicitly carried with me, namely that *Dasein* inhabits the world not only as mind or spirit but also as a body. My early intuitions, derived from a naïve attitude, were partially vindicated.

However, it was only when, later on, I discovered Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological project that I gained a sense that it was possible to recover a more direct insight into embodiment and its role with respect to the subject's relation to the world. His *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) indicated a prepersonal aspect of our being, which finds its manifestation in modes of bodily expression. I understood that primary perception and ensuing motility—which are in fact two sides of the same coin—reveal a primordial synchrony between the subject and the world that could not be explained by my conscious acts. But my investigative journey did not culminate in validating the key importance of my body in intermundane existence. I still needed light to be shed on those intimate but powerful experiences where in the course of my early explorations I sensed that the world of animate and inanimate phenomena was actively drawing me into relationship. I wanted to explore how the inauguration of a *sui generis* community between the perceived things and myself was not exclusively my prerogative but often a response within a not yet fully determined but nevertheless pre-existing matrix. Merleau-Ponty advanced his investigations in that direction in his later writings—notably *Eye and Mind* (1964) inspired by the analysis of painting; and *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968), in which he formulated the principles of his ontology of the flesh.

In parallel to my philosophical studies I also pursued a more experiential route. My longstanding practice of martial arts developed in the direction of contemporary dance and somatic studies, notably Hatha Yoga practice. The latter deepened my awareness of subtle body movements such as breathing and muscular tensions, and indicated the possibility of greater body–mind integration.

Contemporary dance, on the other hand, opened up a vibrant dimension of performance art, its creative energy coexisting with a critical paradigm. The international dance company “Rosas”—founded by Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker —inaugurated my personal experiments as well as theoretical investigations into the dance field. The piece named “Rosas danst Rosas” transmitted a sense of

experimental and exploratory freedom, both in terms of questioning the formality of classical (Western) dance movement repertoires and their staging, transgressing the boundaries of the theatre and utilising urban and natural spaces. These traces started to inspire the then-emerging interdisciplinary research project that I am now presenting here. But it was through the practice of Butoh dance that I discovered a full sense of the exploratory character of performing art training, and its reflective and critical dimensions.

My first encounter with Butoh took place at Sadler's Wells Theatre in London in the Summer of 2003. Although I now recognise it as an event that was crucial for my research, I cannot recall how I came to see the performance *Kagemi. Beyond the Metaphor of Mirrors* by Sankai Juku, an all-male Japanese Butoh group.

The stage was lit by a soft, dim light, which only very subtly marked the boundaries of the performance space. From my elevated perspective, the space—with its overflowing, uncontained sepia toned light—seemed to encroach upon the front sections of the audience. Large, water lily shaped leaves, suspended a couple of centimetres above the ground, were the only props on the stage. The fact that they were suspended added to the effect of blurred boundaries—in this instance on the vertical plane. Hence, even before the dancers appeared, the stage already emanated a particular atmosphere. In metaphorical terms there was an air of timelessness, austerity and calmness, but there was also an almost tangible sense of the suspension of gravity and time. The presence and the particular quality of the space were more than suggested. The space manifested itself as an already active element.

And then the dancers entered the stage: heads shaved, white powdered, half naked, slim figures slowly flowing through a dreamlike space. Although muscular, their bodies exuded an androgynous air, defeating the possibility of assigning them a particular gender. But their slow movements, sometimes arrested in statue-like postures, also gave them the impression of being devoid of life, hollowed out, mere automatons, thus posing questions about their status not only as humans but also as sentient beings. They often moved in a highly synchronised manner, giving an impression of being closely connected. Their bodies, also moving as if suspended in the air just millimetres above the ground, and always maintaining the same level, seemed enchanted as they made their almost excruciatingly painful, slow pilgrimage

across the stage.¹ Paradoxically, there was a simultaneously ghostly and carnal quality to their presence. The intense, bodily attention towards the less substantial, but also corporeal, quality of the space that characterised the dancers' attitudes marked the performance as an inherently reciprocal and interactive event. These characteristics seemed to bring to the fore the existence of an unusually tangible, intercorporeal, connective dimension between the dancers and their medium and, ultimately, between the dancers and the audience.

Not long after seeing the above performance I began my personal Butoh training under the guidance of Atsushi Takenouchi—a renowned Japanese Butoh artist. In subsequent years, I travelled between Poland, the United Kingdom, Italy and France in order to participate in workshops led by Takenouchi as well as other artists, to see Butoh performances and also, from time to time, to perform myself. That period of around six years not only refined my somatic sensitivity and opened my expressive channels, but it also expanded my critical perspectives regarding the sources of Butoh technique and its underlying philosophy.

In a more general sense Butoh created a scene or prism through which Merleau-Ponty's ideas began to reveal their deeper and more concrete sense. And over time I also began to get a sense of where Butoh as an embodied practice opened up territories where Merleau-Ponty's project required 'authentication'. It became clear that bodily enactment, and engagement in processes of somatic transformation, were needed in order to experientially confirm Merleau-Ponty intuitions. Butoh's imagery evoked an intimate relationship with the world of animals and plants as well as with the various manifestations of elemental phenomena such as water, air and earth.

My endeavour was deeply rooted in personal history. Only in the course of writing up the results of my philosophical and embodied investigations did it become clear to me that I had carried the seeds of this thesis in my body and mind from my earliest years. I have no illusions that all of those seeds will have germinated through this work. But at this stage I am content that my passion for philosophy, and my joy in movement and dance, have provided me with a context within which I have been

¹ Later on I found out that "ash walk" is a basic exercise in Butoh training focusing on micro movement and aims at development of deepened psychosomatic awareness.

able to formulate pertinent questions about the nature of my relationship with the sensuous world around me, and to explore possible answers. Is it possible to experience first hand the strength of intercorporeal relations? Are there particular environmental conditions that are more conducive to experiencing this dimension? To become more receptive, is it possible and required that one attain a particular state of body-mind? I came across and engaged with Butoh dance, with its particular cultural take on issues of embodiment and our relationship to the world, to deepen my subjective experience and to enrich the phenomenological perspective of Merleau-Ponty. Readers of this work may have experienced different forms of artistic and/or somatic practices and may come from different critical traditions. But I hope that, in my descriptions, they will be able to recognise phenomena, perceptions and feelings that they too have experienced when they have allowed the world to reveal itself without imposing on it utilitarian demands; when they have treated it as analogous to their own bodies, and vice versa. It is after all still “a marvel too little noticed”—as Merleau-Ponty used to say—that “the sole means I have to go unto the heart of the things, [is] by making myself a world and by making them flesh.”²

² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 134–135.

Introduction

One of the first examples of Butoh dance I experienced was the ‘ash walk’ exercise. I repeated it many times with different teachers as it contains essential aspects which epitomise this contemporary Japanese dance as a performing art. More significantly, however, ash walk also reveals aspects of Butoh as a psychosomatic method of exploration, or ‘body archaeology’, which ‘[digs] out something buried deep down in the body’ and has the potential to transform person’s perception.³

Although simple in execution, it requires that one attend to one’s own body in a manner that from the outset marks a departure from the usual Western active approach in favour of the more receptive Japanese approach, allowing the body and mind to be affected. First I will outline the basics of the position. After that I will describe how I felt, and how this experience affected my perception, which will provide a basis for the claim that a Merleau-Pontian notion of intercorporeality can be ‘fleshed’ out within the context of Butoh dance practice.

One starts ash walk by standing upright with legs hip-distance apart and slightly bowed knees so that the point of gravity is lowered and spine elongated. Arms hang naturally along the torso with only the palms of the hands turned upwards, touching the lower abdomen and resting slightly in the crevice of the groin. One’s face is relaxed with the jaw muscle loosened. One’s tongue, in accord with Eastern meditation techniques, rests on the palate. Significantly, eyelids are dropped naturally so that the eyes are only half open, relaxed and unfocused. Each step is taken in parallel with slow breath exhalation; each transition of the body weight happens through gradual sliding of a foot without entirely lifting it from the floor. During the process shoulders are kept at the same level. One walks allowing thoughts to come and go without holding on to them.

Over the course of this exercise I was always encouraged to keep my eyes soft, and my focus diffused. By avoiding projecting a gaze on a single goal and instead employing my peripheral vision I remained open to the surroundings. Yet by reducing the extent to which I was focusing on the external world I was able to perceive myself – in both body and mind - more clearly.⁴ A distribution between

³ Toshiharu Kasai, ‘A Butoh Dance Method for Psychosomatic Exploration,’ *Memoirs of Hokkaido Institute of Technology* 27 (1999), pp. 309-316.

⁴ This distance towards visual input distinguishes Butoh from Western dance and its general occulocentric paradigm.

‘outer’ and ‘inner’ perception would have shifted slowly. After some minutes, with each step I began to sense a subtle touch of the floor caressing the bare soles of my feet. A regular rhythm of breathing quieted my mind and a longer out-breath brought attention to a growing sensation of warmth in the lower abdomen. The Japanese call this area *hara*, and say it is a centre of our *ki*-energy: a psychophysical energy that circulates in and between all sentient beings.

At some point in the course of the practice my Butoh teacher Atsushi Takenouchi would have uttered emphatic, but gently spoken words: ‘Forget everything. Just be.’ As I carried on, I started to recognise my partners by their silhouettes. Moreover I have also become aware of their approach from behind by the sensation on my skin changing, registering a mixture of warmth and a gentle touch of air. Internally, I could hear a gentle beating of my heart and sensation of the warmth from *hara* travelling through the torso and along arms, as if emanating through the palms of our hands. Eventually I started to sense a sort of density of space.⁵ The space had revealed its own quality. Even a slow gesture of my arm had brought a more intense sensation on my skin, which felt more porous than usual, as if losing its definite limit. Sensation coming from the surrounding space, caused by my movement, or the presence of my partner had a similar effect.

Towards the end of this exercise I was experiencing a more equal distribution between outer and inner perception. At the same time I also became more aware of an ambiguous nature of division between outer and inner. The sensible world – other people, things, even space, felt intertwined with my flesh, suggesting a thought of Merleau-Ponty’s: ‘where are we to put the limit between the body and the world, since the world is flesh.’⁶

Butoh begins with the basics, with a simple movement and awareness of the body as it is, and opens a sphere of sensorial receptivity as it is allowed to unfold. Yet, a focused practice can reveal that the body is a site of not only internal richness, but also functions as a nexus within the matrix of direct bodily resonance. To start with, however, this ‘simplicity’ may not be that easy to achieve for a contemporary

⁵ Toshiharu Kasai, performing under the name of Itto Morita says that ‘if one becomes accustomed to employing the peripheral vision, one can acquire another ability: the ability to see void space.’ He explains that ‘while we typically look at things by ‘watching’, there is also a way to see the space itself, the space that is left behind.’ Toshiharu Kasai and Kate Parsons, ‘Perception in Butoh Dance’, *Memoirs of the Hokkaido Institute of Technology*, no. 31 (2003), pp. 257-264.

⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), p. 138.

human being, so disconnected from her/his own *soma*, one's own living body. Merleau-Ponty's initiated a somatic turn already in his first writings: *The Structure of Behaviour* (1942) and *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) where he made human motility, the intentional arc and a distinction between the subject-body (lived body) and the object-body (body as seen by the empirical sciences) the main topics of his analyses. Later he came to question the methodology of his earlier investigations and in his last period developed the notion of hyper-reflection (*sur-réflexion*). The concept of hyper-reflection is not about an additional, 'hyper' level of abstraction, but rather an attempt to develop a method that would provide access to the dimension of the 'wild being', or the 'brute world', where prepersonal, corporeal relations underlay both the intersubjective life of human beings and their relations with the sensible world in general. In other words it was a phenomenological attempt to engage directly with the life of the sentient body and to recover a reciprocal, intercorporeal relationship with the world.

I claim that Butoh dance practice provides a complementary approach which functions as somatic hyper-reflection, and through its active engagement with the body allows one to achieve a body-mind state where Merleau-Ponty's ideas of chiasm, reversibility and intercorporeality gain a more concrete, experiential sense.

Sensorial reciprocity within an intercorporeal field is even more direct in the Butoh dance that is practiced in natural surroundings, where the exposure to the living landscape is more penetrating than in the dance studio as described in the above example. Butoh encourages us to engage with the animate world, including, but not limiting our relations to representatives of our own species. Butoh derives this attitude from its own cultural ground, where the ideas of both *ki*-energy and *kokoro* (translated as hear-mind, prescribed by *Shinto*, an indigenous religion, to all sentient and non-sentient beings) produce a more egalitarian and interpenetrating set of relationships. Therefore Butoh opens our understanding and our senses to a wider web of relations, circumscribed by the realm which Merleau-Ponty called 'Flesh.' There is a clear link here between Butoh's implicit philosophy, contemporary developments of eco-phenomenology and Lingis' phenomenology of the elemental.

Butoh dance embeds us anew in the landscapes that Merleau-Ponty's favourite painters Cézanne, Matisse, Renoir brought to life, and whose paintings and personal diaries provided many invaluable insights into the structure of intercorporeal realm. However, the analysis based on painting had visual biases and

therefore limitations. It cannot be denied that Merleau-Ponty was aware of these difficulties. He gave proofs of this in his project aiming at developing a unified theory that would include all sensorial input and, by the same token, extend the validity of his ontology of flesh. In his final writings, collected under the title *The Visible and the Invisible*, he developed the theory of synaesthesia, or overlap of the senses, as a primordial and constitutive experience. Yet, compared with vision, other senses remained undeveloped within the context of ontology of flesh. It could be claimed that the untimely death of Merleau-Ponty interrupted a creation of a theory with a more balanced distribution of accents.

Chapter 1. Ontology of Flesh

This chapter engages with the heart of Merleau-Ponty's later project as expressed in the final chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible*: 'The Intertwining – The Chiasm', also found in *The Working Notes*. I will specifically elaborate the most crucial notion, that of his ontology of 'flesh'. Together with the concepts of intertwining and reversibility this will create a sense of the new relations submerged in 'the corporeal', not only within the human being but first and foremost between man and the world. The chapter will take the form of a close reading of the text, especially of those passages which might bring us to an effective understanding and use of the notion of intercorporeality. My interpretation will be informed by Merleau-Pontian scholarship positioned around phenomenological studies. I will refer to the contributors of *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty* (John, Smith 1990), i.e. Claude Leford, M.C. Dillon, Gary Brent Madison and David Michael Levin. The works of Renaud Barbaras (2006), Daniela Vallega-Neu (2005), Lingis Alphonso (1996), and Sue L. Cataldi (1993) will also be of significant importance

Chapter 2. Phenomenologies of embodiment – selected perspectives

This initial analysis will elaborate upon the term 'embodiment', the understanding of which is crucial for the clarification of intercorporeality. This term is understood as 'an existential condition in which the body is the subjective source or intersubjective ground of experience.' (T. J. Csordas 1999, 145) It appears that the notion of embodiment marks a division from the universalistic description of the subject in terms of consciousness.

David Abram, in his acclaimed work *The Spell of the Sensuous* (1996) represents the field of eco-phenomenology. In his work he tries to unearth the traces of our ancient reciprocity with the natural world of animals and plants, as well as mountains, rivers and weather patterns by drawing inspiration not only from the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty, but also from the practical wisdom of the indigenous people of America and Australia.

The second voice that inspires my own reflection on the nature of our sensuous connection with the surrounding world is Alphonso Lingis, who continues Merleau-Ponty's project of the ontology of flesh and critically reevaluates it.⁷ Lingis developed his ideas under the headline of substance ontology, or the phenomenology of substance, which evolved from his reflections on Merleau-Ponty's later philosophy and Emanuel Levinas' project, which was critical of the thinking of Husserl and Heidegger. In his own strand of phenomenology, orientated towards ethics and underlined by ethnological descriptions, he advocates an approach that appreciates the substantive, sensuous and material nature of the things which surround us. Particularly pertinent works are *Phenomenological Explanations* (1986), *Sensation: Intelligibility in Sensibility* (1996), and *The Imperative* (1999).

The third group of sources that will allow me to explore different facets of and re-evaluate the notion of intercorporeality are drawn from dancers, who as scholars are rooted within the phenomenological tradition. As my approach take into account Butoh's implicit view of the body-world relationship, philosophies of the incarnated subject and its relationship with the sensuous environment as enacted through bodily training are particularly useful.

These themes have been critically discussed by Sondra Fraleigh in her latest book *Butoh: Metamorphic Dance and Global Alchemy* (2010), while her earlier work, co-authored with Tamah Nakamura, *Hijikata Tatsumi and Ohno Kazuo* (2006) and the previously mentioned *Dancing Identity: Metaphysics in Motion* (2004) also explore Butoh's philosophy of embodiment to a certain degree. Her perspective is firmly rooted in her first-hand experience as a

⁷ Alphonso Lingis translated Merleau-Ponty's last work *The Visible and The Invisible*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968 into English as well as the seminal works of Manuel Levinas: *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969; *Existence and Existents*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978 and *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981.

contemporary dancer, influenced by both expressionist and postmodern dance. She complemented her dance expertise with in-depth research into somatic practices; notably she is a certified Feldenkrais practitioner, and in the 1980s she turned to Butoh becoming a disciple of Kazuo Ohno, co-founder of the Butoh movement.

Maxine Sheet-Johnstone moved from her practice as a dancer and choreographer into dance theory with her seminal *The Phenomenology of Dance* (1966) where she provided an analysis of the formative basis of dance with values located in the moving self. In her subsequent philosophical works she remained grounded in a focus on the body and animate movement that can be described as post-phenomenological. She moved into discussions based on the intersection of phenomenology, evolutionary psychology and neuroscience. Her most recent publications *The Corporeal Turn. An Interdisciplinary Reader* (2009) and *The Primacy of Movement* (1999 and 2011, expanded 2nd edition) with their elaboration of such themes as surface sensitivity in the context of evolutionary biology and linking with ontology of Flesh, kinesthetic memory as elaborated by Russian neuropsychologist Aleksandr Luria, and evolutionary bases that play out in dance improvisation were instrumental for my interpretation of intercorporeality and the key role of Butoh dance practice as source of experiential, phenomenological data.

Finally, it is a work by Suzan Kozel titled *Closer. Performance, Technologies, Phenomenology* (2007) that completes the list of my inspirations for this chapter. Her book is an exemplary case of practice-informed scholarship. It is a phenomenological analysis of the intersection of mind, body, world and technology in her dance/movement projects. She understands and utilises the notion of intercorporeality as a suitable experiential and conceptual interface between human embodiment and the virtual world of new technologies.

Chapter 3. Conceptual framework of the Japanese Body–Mind–World theory

It is pertinent for the overall argument of this thesis to provide a focused overview of the cultural principles and historical process in Japan that produced the theories and practices promoting a unique mode of intercorporeal relationship with the surrounding world. This chapter describes the overarching fundamental tenets of Chinese and Japanese ontology, and the way in which these differ to the

Western paradigm is analysed. For instance, relational, fluid, qualitative, and process orientated categories are important characteristics of Eastern ontology. It also introduces selected ontological and aesthetic concepts such as *Ma*, *kokoro* and *Ki-energy*. The publications of Nagatomo Shigenori (2009, 1992) and Yuasa Yosuo (1993, 1987) contain competent introductions to the Japanese philosophies of the body and are a useful link between phenomenological theories and Butoh practice.

Chapter 4. Butoh: Dimensions of intercorporeality

Butoh dance is granted a privileged status in my investigation. This is due to its intensely bodily character in general, but also because it is in the course of my own dance practice that the inspiration for this research emerged. In the first part I will present the history and the most general social and cultural inspirations of this form of art. I will then discuss Tatsumi Hijikata and his conception of the body, as found in his own writings as well as critical sources that will support my reconstruction. My research into this area will be based on the texts of Hijikata and Ohno translated into English and published in *The Drama Review* in spring 2000, but also on the writings of other dancers such as Min Tanaka, Toshiharu Kasai, Sondra Fraleigh, and on two PhD theses devoted to Butoh dance by Joan Elizabeth Laage (1993) and Kurihara Nanako (1996).

The second part will be devoted first to phenomenological descriptions of selected performances of three Butoh artists: the Sankai Juku Company, Kō Murobushi and Atsushi Takenouchi. Afterwards an elaboration of my own Butoh dance experiences will offer an empirical account and open a potential access to the lived experience of intercorporeality. As such, it will serve as a sort of ‘laboratory’ which can intensify the sensations of our ‘own’ bodies and enhance awareness of interrelatedness – with people, things, space and ground.

Language, as Merleau-Ponty notes in the final passages of *The Visible and the Invisible*, is a flesh itself, ‘less heavy, more transparent’, but a flesh nevertheless (1968: 153). He seems to suggest that language is able to evoke this intercorporeality that we experience in a latent, pre-reflective dimension of our everyday life. Therefore, what is necessary here is to avoid the petrification of our experience of intercorporeality in ‘objective’ language, or as he calls it ‘the linguistic language’ (1968: 154). I realise, however, this last postulate might be the most difficult to fulfil.

Chapter I

Ontology of Flesh

Introduction

Merleau-Ponty sought, throughout his philosophy and particularly in his unfinished work *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968), to elucidate what he called ‘brute world’ or ‘wild Being’. He situated his thought, or rather he rediscovered that any—including philosophical—thought is always already situated within the sensible world. As Merleau-Ponty continually states, we are primarily submerged in a dense texture of the world beyond the world of culture, and surrounded by opaque, corporeal things. According to him, we never cease to participate in the spectacle of the World.⁸ He made that point clear in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), in which he disclosed the structures of our body that always anchor us in the events of the world, even beneath the level of our active conscious life. He postulated an operation of the tacit cogito, or bodily intentionality, that guarantees our relationship with the world. Yet, in the years following the publication of *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty came to realise that the traditional language of consciousness perpetuated a long-standing dualism of mind and body, and subject and object. It therefore framed questions about the world in a prejudiced way, placing it over and above the sensible world. For that reason, if a way of accessing the primordial Being is to be achieved, we first have to revise the philosophical language based on traditional reflexive thought.

The aim of the above introduction is mainly to expose a particular theme of Merleau-Ponty’s later thinking, that is, the methodological question of finding a suitable language or the means by which we conduct our investigation into the domain of ‘brute Being’. I believe that a presentation of that aspect of Merleau-

⁸ The meaning of the notion of ‘spectacle’ in Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of flesh is a specific one and differs from the popular sense associated with performative arts or the one at the heart of the practice of the ‘Situationist’ movement. It is not created in order to effect a certain result in spectators or society in general, as supposed by the Situationists. Neither can it be provoked, because it is already at work. Merleau-Ponty designates by it a ‘reciprocal insertion and intertwining’ between the visible body and the invisible depth which is a dimension of Flesh. At the same time it is worth mentioning that Merleau-Ponty was prone to using metaphors suggesting links with the performing arts. He often speaks about the ‘stage’ and ‘staging’. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), p.138.

Ponty's thought as presented in *The Visible and the Invisible*, will offer a favourable entry point to the circular and overlapping structure of the ontology of flesh.

1.1 Hyperreflection

Merleau-Ponty left only a few indications as to the precise meaning of the notion of hyperreflection (*sur-réflexion*). It should be borne in mind, however, that he proposed a new way of carrying out a philosophical investigation in response to the 'demand', or what Alphonso Lingis will later call the 'imperative', issuing from wild Being. As he lacked the comfort of an established methodology, Merleau-Ponty had to develop his own method, or perhaps rediscover it along the way. In either case the first principle had to be truthfulness to the mode of our experiencing the world revealed to us in our bodily being, prior to any explicit objectification of the world. In *The Bodily Dimension of Thinking* (2005) Daniela Vallega-Neu examines 'thought as a bodily event' while engaging with six prominent figures of the Western philosophical tradition: Plato, Nietzsche, Scheler, Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger and Foucault. She articulates Merleau-Ponty's attitude towards this problem in the following words:

The issue is to think and articulate this brute world and with it primitive Being without objectifying it, and to investigate our bodily Being in this world from within his nonobjectified being.⁹

But this is precisely the problem with traditional philosophy in which objectivity is perceived as a virtue that is achieved in the movement of reflexive thought. As a result we receive a transposition of the incarnate subject into a transcendental subject, and of the reality of the world into ideality, thus losing the 'natal bond with the world'¹⁰. This critique is probably directed at Kant and Husserl who, in different ways, conceived of our relation to the world in terms of reflection on the way in which thought is constituted in the thinking subject.¹¹ Because reflection articulates

⁹ Daniela Vallega-Neu, *The Bodily Dimension in Thinking* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005) p. 60.

¹⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968) pp. 53–54.

¹¹ Within Husserl's transcendental phenomenology we might distinguish the intuitive aspect of a direct grasp of the essences of objects as well as the reflective activity of consciousness. This opposes Kantianism by claiming that transcendental mental processes are not merely transcendently deduced

itself along the line of the subject-object relations that lose the ‘natal bond’, it ‘overlooks’ its origination in the ‘primitive’ world, which may otherwise be experienced in prereflexive bodily perception.

And yet, Merleau-Ponty admits that this long lasting tradition, with its claim that only immanence is a sure and independent way of fixing meaning, harbours something compelling: ‘this moment of reflection will always at first sight be convincing: in a sense it is imperative, it is truth itself, and one does not see how philosophy could dispense with it.’ (1968: 31) It is indeed difficult to conceive of a philosophy that would not be a kind of reflection—a kind of bending back of thought on itself—as it is specifically in this movement of bending back that a philosophy attempts to understand beings as well as the relationship of thought to itself and to what it reflects. (2005: 61) Hence we can justifiably question whether there could ever be a form of adequate reflection that would not suspend our natal relation with the world¹², a type of reflection that, as Merleau-Ponty describes it, ‘turns back over the density of the world in order to clarify it, but which, coming second, reflects back to it only its own light.’ (1968: 35)

Merleau-Ponty recognises that there is an inherent impossibility in thinking of the ‘primitive’ or ‘brute’ Being ‘in itself’ as it might be prior to any reflection. The movement of reflection always introduces an alteration in the texture of the world by the very act of acting within it. Reflection changes the action of the ‘spectacle’ because, as an incarnated reflection, it belongs to the world. (1968: 38) This realisation presents us with two options concerning our understanding of brute Being. On the one hand, since we are unable to directly access brute being, we might as well abandon the attempt entirely.¹³ It could also be maintained that insofar as we cannot pre-reflectively think of brute Being, we should accept the possibility that the notion is just a construction of thought and, as such, does not address what it was designed to address: an actual Being as experienced in our perceptual mode of existence, the world in which we are incarnated. (2005: 61)

as conditions for the possibility of objectivity, but can be directly intuited. Yet, in the last instance and without going into detail in that complex matter, even this act relies on the positioning of a thing as an object for the consciousness. Merleau-Ponty had already issued an indirect critique of this aspect of transcendental phenomenology in *Phenomenology of Perception*.

¹² Functioning under the name of phenomenological reduction, or epoché it was indeed a principal preposition of the phenomenological method.

¹³ I think it could be contended that Kant’s distinction between phenomena and noumena, with the latter being analogous to ‘brute being’, amounted to such a resignation.

The above options posit brute Being in opposition to the act of thinking and infer that the domain of the primordial Being defies reflecting thought altogether. Another alternative would be to conceive of them not as opposed but rather as belonging together. Merleau-Ponty remains ambiguous on this matter insofar as he at one point affirms that ‘the sensible world is “older” than the universe of thought’ while later maintaining that different strata of Being traditionally articulated in terms of an opposition between nature and culture; the sensible and the intelligible; the visible and the invisible, cannot be clearly distinguished. (1968: 12) That brings Vallega-Neu to claim that Merleau-Ponty did not conceive of those oppositions as standing in contradiction at all. Subsequently, he came to articulate those relationships in terms of the ‘chiasm’: a pivotal term for his ontology of Flesh—which will be examined in detail in a later section of this chapter. For the sake of the current analysis let me just briefly state that, following Vallega-Neu, in the context of the ontology of Flesh, the chiasm is a structure of the original relationship (in Merleau-Ponty’s terms, the structure of reversibility) articulating Being and its sensible element: Flesh.

By now, we can say that Merleau-Ponty, in his analysis of the reflective thought, was careful to avoid the easy, but potentially fatal gesture of breaking the bond with the philosophy of reflection altogether and expelling his thought to the abyss of irrationality where it would annihilate itself in the sphere of indifferentiation. Indeed, it is not a matter of returning to a veiled origin, or of coinciding with the virginal world, as underlined by Barbaras when he writes that ‘the “brute” or “wild” world is in no way the site of the irrational.’ (2005: 65) What Merleau-Ponty proposes is rather a sort of deconstruction of reflective thought; an indication of its omissions and blank spots; moments where the sensibility of thought gets lost. In that vein, and taking vision as an example of a sensual layer, he says that the philosopher ‘suspends the brute vision only in order to make it pass into the order of the expressed: that the vision remains his model of measure, and it is upon that vision that the network of significations which philosophy organises in order to reconquer it must open.’ (1968: 36) Here Merleau-Ponty offers a description of the specific process performed by the philosopher when brute vision is assessed and reconstructed according to the rules of an objectifying discourse. No faults as such are signalled in that instant, as it is not that the whole reflective analysis is false: what is at issue is that it often remains naïve. (1968: 34) It is an unavoidable act that

thinking suspends a prereflexive engagement with things in order to transpose it to the order of the expressed. According to Merleau-Ponty, the prereflexive bodily engagement is erased in this suspension, while remaining the ground and the measure of that transposition. The charge against classical philosophical reflection is that, in due course, this lived measure gets lost. It is to remedy this forgetfulness—although it would be more apt to call it a deeply engraved philosophical distrust towards the corporeal dimension—and to maintain contact in our thought with primitive Being that Merleau-Ponty postulates that ‘a sort of *hyperreflexion* (*sur-réflexion*) that would also take itself and the changes it introduces into the spectacle into account.’ (1968: 38)

Merleau-Ponty at first defines hyperreflexion in negative terms. He says that, in opposition to traditional reflection, it would not ‘lose sight of the brute thing and the brute perception’ and would not cut the ‘organic bonds of perception and the perceived thing.’ (*Ibid.*) I should note that Merleau-Ponty here speaks about the ‘perceived thing’ and ‘perception’ rather than about the ‘perceived object’ and the ‘perceiving subject’. This signals his commitment to a nonobjectifying mode of reflection insofar as hyperreflexion, taking into account its own activity and its unfolding in the process of bodily perception, cannot, as it were, remain split into two equal halves.

In a more positive vein, hyperreflexion could be referred to as ‘a reflexive awareness that lets be occurrences that are opened up in it.’ (2005: 62) This recourse to the notion of reflexive awareness is of utmost importance as it helps to disclose exploratory moments of the practice of performative art while simultaneously allowing us to capture the sense of hyperreflexion at work. Vallega-Neu writes:

I may find this reflexive awareness in certain moments in dancing or making music where I find myself aware in the event of the dance or the event of music that seems to occur in a strange way beyond my control, events in which I find myself not as an agent but rather as an absorbed as well as perceptive spectator. This awareness is like witnessing an event where the witness is not just absorbed into an activity but also has a distance to it. And yet this witnessing awareness is not merely passive but allows through its occurrence an opening, a coming into light of an event which otherwise would remain obscured or would not happen at all.’ (2005: 62).

What is characteristic of this sort of reflection is that it continues to bear witness to the bodily being in the world by keeping it manifest in the events of thought and articulation. It is particularly important if we want to elucidate the texture of everyday life events that are lived through our minds as well as through our bodies. By taking a ‘detour’, in reflection, through our body with its ever-changing states of tension and relaxation, and its shifting modes of relating to the world, we take notice of a certain opacity that, contrary to the views of classical phenomenology, characterises not only our bodies but our minds too. Yet this opacity does not imply a defeat of reflection. It is, rather, another step that brings it down to a level below the purely perceptual plane. In its movement it would include not only the ‘play of the senses and shifting perceptions but would also include awareness of other dynamic dimensions of thinking, like shifts of moods, resistances, openings, closures, tensions, and other bodily motions.’ (2005: 63) In other words the realisation of this opacity as an inherent aspect of our being unearths another dimension where somatic and emotional, as well as imaginary components come into play and intertwine. Hyperreflection is therefore able to inhabit the moments of loss, the leaks of the perceptual sense that occur in moments of reflection, while at the same time witnessing the emergence of words, images, and configurations of bodies that fill that gap. (2005: 63)

Vallega-Neu explains that reflexive awareness occurs in articulations that do not necessarily involve speech, but that, rather, remain silent. This assumption finds its affirmation in the passage from *The Visible and the Invisible* where Merleau-Ponty states:

... it [hyperreflection] would set itself the task of thinking about them [things], of reflecting on the transcendence of the world as transcendence, speaking of it not according to the law of the word-meanings inherent in the given language, but with a perhaps difficult effort that uses the significations of the words to express, beyond themselves, our mute contact with the things, when they are not yet things said. (1968: 38)

According to Vallega-Neu, our mute contact with things points towards a prereflective and prelinguistic bodily engagement with the world. It suggests—in concord with the earlier findings of Merleau-Ponty in *Phenomenology of*

Perception—that our perceptual life, despite often lacking articulation in speech, is nevertheless enlivened and structured by an articulation *sui generis* on the level of sense perception.

Merleau-Ponty's incitement to use 'the signification of the words' in order 'to express beyond themselves our mute contact with the things when they are not yet things said' is extremely consequential as it contains, in a compressed form, the premise of his theory of language intertwined with a theory of perception. It would, for that reason, be useful to unpack this in the hope that doing so will enable us to draw more practical guidelines for our analysis. Merleau-Ponty encourages us to take note of the internal dimension of the language: a rudimentary substructure that is already orientated towards the brute world prior to the full expression of codified language. He seems to suggest that language and bodily perception are co-substantial: they are both grounded within the common structure he calls *Flesh*. This statement is of the ontological sort and as such it is at the heart of Merleau-Ponty's ontology of *Flesh*. At this stage, however, I will refrain from further investigation on that matter, since this will be the subject of a later exposition of the *Flesh Ontology*, and is of great importance in analysing the notion of intercorporeality in the context of *Butoh* dance. Instead, I will further pursue the statement concerning the relationship between language and expression resonating in the passage from which the quotation was drawn.

How then, does the mute perceptual life translate, or coexist with, the silent 'signification of the words' in the first place? And how does the sensible world of perception find its annunciation in the reflexive realm of thought, and eventually of speech? We should be wary of closing the gap between those two orders too quickly, even though we experience them as inseparable. Merleau-Ponty gives a very careful account of the matter, acknowledging a differential gap and while at the same time thinking of them as joined. Hence, to express our mute contact with things in language does not, for Merleau-Ponty, mean to attain a sort of coincidence with the brute world. He asserts that 'if we dream of finding again a natural world or time through coincidence [...] then language is a power of error, since it cuts the continuous tissue that joins us vitally to the things and to the past.' (1968: 125) He refutes the notion of language as a mask that interrupts or distorts our relation with *Being*. Instead he introduces a 'quasi-performative' notion of language—insofar as the notion of the 'performative' would refer us to the linguistic theory of Austin and

the performative theory of Judith Butler. Merleau-Ponty states that ‘we need only to take language too in the living or nascent state, with all its references, those behind it, which connects to the mute things it interpellates, and those it sends before itself and which make up the world of things said.’ (1968: 125) Consequently, Vallega-Neu concludes this fragment by saying, ‘language understood as such an original expression, never coincides with a pure Being but nevertheless carries the silent sense of Beings.’ (2005: 63)

Summarising this section it must be admitted that Merleau-Ponty’s notion of hyperreflection is more often negatively articulated than given a positive description. The difficulty stems from the fact that it was created in parallel with the rest of Merleau-Ponty’s later notions of thought and, as such, it was defined in an uncompleted process. For the same reason, we will have to pursue the heuristic process of Merleau-Ponty’s ontology without the comfort of a fixed methodology. As a quasi-methodological directive for our reading, what nevertheless remains true is that Merleau-Ponty’s ontological phenomenology is a call for an awareness of the alternations that language introduces into perception, as well as attentiveness to the perceptual articulation of our being-in-the-world.

1.2 The body – a site of reflexive perception.

The previous section was devoted to the quasi-methodological notion of hyperreflection, conceived by Merleau-Ponty as a new way of accessing the field of the brute world. It was stated that this mode of reflection could also be called a reflexive awareness—a term proposed by Daniela Vallega-Neu. She, like other researcher-dancers, identified the moments when the body takes the lead in our existence, as is the case in dance. (Fraleigh 2004; Kozel 2007) In general we tend to think that our reflective capacity is diminished in those moments, and that this is why those instances cannot provide us with significant insight into either the perceptual or the ontological aspects of our being. However, contrary to the opinions of non-movers, many professional dancers are able to maintain a high degree of awareness, allowing insight into the nexus of the bodily and mental motivations at work. These observations stand in agreement with an excellent account of these abilities—supported by numerous testimonies—provided by Sondra Fraleigh in her book *Dancing Identity: Metaphysics in Motion* (2004) and Susan Kozel in *Closer:*

Performance, Technology, Phenomenology (2007). This theme will be taken up in the next chapter in the context of Butoh dance.

For now, let us continue the exposition of Merleau-Ponty's ontology of flesh by focusing on his original application of hyperreflection as a way of reflexively inhabiting the body in order to unearth its natural bond with wild being. This, in turn, should bring us closer to the heart of Merleau-Ponty's ontology: the notion of Flesh.

In the chapter entitled 'The Intertwining – The Chiasm' Merleau-Ponty proceeds with his ontological project by declaring that:

It is the body, and it alone, because it is a two-dimensional being, that can bring us to the things themselves, which are themselves not flat beings but beings in depth, inaccessible to a subject that would survey them from above, open to him alone that, if it is possible, would coexist with them in the same world. (1968: 136)

The above fragment is a rare instance in the history of Western philosophy of positing the body not as a problem or hindrance but as a privileged being, which forms a gateway to Being in general. Merleau-Ponty seems to think that it is by thinking through—rather than about—embodiment that a radically unified ontology can be attained. In *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty postulated that it is the body that guarantees our participation in the world and he adopted an approach that defied the deep-rooted dualism of mind and body. However, his philosophy was at that time highly influenced by the Husserlian philosophy of consciousness and it consequently elaborated the theme of embodiment from the perspective of intentional consciousness.

1.2.1 Perceptual faith

In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty takes recourse to the notion of 'perceptual faith' in order to express primordial experience:

For us, the "perceptual faith" includes everything that is given to the natural man in the original in an experience-source, with the force of what is inaugural and present in person, according to a view that for him is ultimate

and could not conceivably be more perfect or closer—whether we are considering things perceived in the ordinary sense of the word, or his initiation into the past, the imaginary, language, the predicative truth of science, works of art, the others, or history. We are not prejudging the relations that may exist between these different “layers”, nor even that they are “layers”; and it is a part of our task to decide this, in terms of what questioning our brute or wild experience will have taught us. (1968: 158)

The faith to which Merleau-Ponty refers does not require a specific act of consciousness, but it is nonthetic (that is, it does not require an explicit positing) in its character and, as such, Merleau-Ponty calls it ‘animal faith’. This reference to the animal world and the suggestion that we might, in a fundamental way, be participating in the same brute world, is justified by the analysis contained in his lectures entitled ‘The concept of Nature’— these were simultaneous with his book *The Visible and the Invisible*. Robert Vallier has suggested that Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of Flesh was to a significant extent supported by his analysis of the animal.¹⁴ Consequently, it might be argued that this term describes the dimension of our prereflexive sense perception. Such a perception does not lead to conscious objectification on the part of the subject. The correlation between the subject and the object of perception has not yet been achieved and the perceptual situation could be best described as a unitary occurrence. The perceptual gestalt fills the whole experiential field. That sort of faith is neither an act of choice nor a decision, in the rational sense, nor even a form of commitment in the religious sense, but a totality within which one is always implied. To be sure one can have doubts about its precise content, but without it one is unable to doubt anything else because, as Merleau-Ponty writes, ‘it is because first I believe in the world and in the things that I believe in the order and the connection of my thoughts.’ (1968: 50) Crucially, perceptual faith does not only reveal our silent connection with things but also the way in which we reach the past; the imaginary dimension of our lives; and ideas, which ‘imply quite sophisticated modes of expression’. (2005: 65) However, it is in this connection with things or, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, ‘an encounter with natural things’, that

¹⁴ Robert Vallier, ‘The Indiscernible Joining: Structure, Signification, and Animality in Merleau-Ponty’s *La Nature*,’ *Chiasmi International* 3 (2001). The references to the animal world will prove very fruitful in the context of Butoh dance.

perception gains the status of ‘the archetype of the originating encounter, instituted and renewed in the encounter with the past, the imaginary, the idea.’(1968: 158)

How are we to understand the archetype of perception? In what sense does its originary movement institute and renew itself in these other ‘layers’ of expression? The word ‘archetype’ requires clarification here. ‘*Arche*’ signifies something ancient and primordial, preceding other forms in time. But it also implies something elementary, basic and simple; something from which more complex or sophisticated forms usually arise. Structurally, it has the characteristic of being able to subsist in current forms, and even if it takes a somewhat rudimentary form, it reproduces the style of being in a modern form. This last feature suggests that a dynamic process, rather than a static presence, is at stake insofar as the archetypal status of any given formation or relation is to be upheld.

Hence, when Merleau-Ponty speaks of the archetype of perception, he hopes to unearth and understand an original mode of relation, or style of relating, that transpires in our contact with things. Our encounter with things outlines the primary field of his investigation. What happens, then, in our encounter with things? Contrary to his earlier view, articulated in *Phenomenology of Perception*, it is not exclusively our body that initiates the contact, ‘no doubt, it is not entirely my body that perceives: I know that it can prevent me from perceiving, that I cannot perceive without its permission.’ (Merleau-Ponty, VI 9). The bipolar, hierarchical relation between an active body and a passive thing becomes blurred. Merleau-Ponty acknowledges that

the relation between the things and my body is decidedly singular: it is what makes me sometimes remain in appearances, and it is also what sometimes brings me to the things themselves; it is what produces the buzzing of appearances, it is also what silences them and casts me fully into the world. (1968: 8).

The traces of the philosophy of consciousness have to be abandoned. We do not look at things as being in front of us, as absolute points of Being, but find ourselves rather in the realm of the ‘perceived’. The ‘perceived’ is the primary field, a spatiotemporal whole that affords us the possibility of perception. Vallega-Neu observes that ‘the act of perception dissolves into the perceived’ or, as she reiterates, ‘the act of perception

and with it our body appears to first emerge *from* the perceived.’ (2005: 65) The possibility of perception is there because there is a kinship between our bodies and the order of things. Merleau-Ponty articulates this fact, simultaneously signalling the originary differentiation that is on the other side of the perception:

The body unites us directly with the things through its own ontogenesis, by welding to one another the two outlines of which it is made, its two laps: the sensible mass it is and the mass of the sensible wherein it is born by segregation and upon which, as seer, it remains open. (1968: 136)

Merleau-Ponty strives, from the very beginning of his analysis, not so much to strike the balance, but to express these two simultaneous moments that structure the body’s encounter with things: their fundamental homogeneity and irradicable distance. This should not be seen as a contradiction but, rather, as an articulation of the determinants of the structure that is at work in the realm of the ‘experience-source’ of perception.

1.2.2 Double sensation

In an attempt to explain this structure, Merleau-Ponty refers to the well-known phenomenon of double sensation. In classical psychology it is understood to be one of the characteristics that differentiate animate bodies from other, material, bodies, that is, things. Double sensation manifests itself when I touch one hand with the other, as this action is accompanied by the double sensation of both touching and being touched. (Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*). Edmund Husserl was the first to focus on this sensation in the context of phenomenological philosophy.¹⁵ In *Ideen II* he endowed this phenomenon with a special importance in the understanding of the status of the human body. Specifically, he recognised that this experience, shared by us all, could shed light on the relation between our subjective embodiment and our encounter with the other. He began by acknowledging a peculiar two-sidedness of

¹⁵ In paragraph 36 of the chapter called ‘Constitution of the Body as bearer of localized sensations’ Husserl writes: ‘...when I touch the left hand I also find in it, too, series of touch sensations, which are ‘localized’ in it, though these are not constitutive of properties (such as roughness or smoothness of the hand, of this physical thing). If I speak of the *physical* thing, ‘left hand’, then I am abstracting from these sensations (a ball of lead has nothing like them and likewise for every ‘merely’ physical thing, every thing that is not my body). If I do include them, then it is not that the physical thing is now richer, but because it *becomes flesh, it senses*’.

the body. On the one hand it is given as an interiority, a volitional structure and a dimension of sensing, but it is on the other hand also given as a visual and tactile exteriority.¹⁶ We are used to this double presentation of our body. Indeed we have no doubts that we are confronted with the totality and the unity of our body. Hence, should we not ask, why do we experience the visual and tactile body as the exterior of the body at all? When I touch my own hand, the touched hand is not given as a mere object, as it feels the touch itself. Had it lacked that experience, I would not feel it to be my own hand. Anyone who has fallen asleep with their arm as a pillow will know how strange is to wake up with a numb arm: it does not respond to touch, we have no volitional control over it, and it feels like a foreign object attached to us. Normally, the difference between touching one's own body and touching anything else is a double-sensation. It presents us with an ongoing alternation between touching and being touched. We experience the dual nature of the body, since the very same hand can be passive or active depending on the moment. The relation is always reversible, and according to Husserl, this reversibility shows the interiority and the exteriority of the body to be different manifestations of the same thing. (Hua 13/163; 14/75). From this, Husserl concludes that the body's self-exploration grants us insight into our own exteriority and, as such, is crucial to that empathy (Hua 15/652). In the last analysis, this experience reveals a remarkable interplay between *ipseity* and *alterity* that, even if only in rudimentary form, structures our own self-experience. (Zahavi 2008: 157)

Merleau-Ponty makes recourse to the experience of double sensation in a narrative that is a continuation and also a radicalisation of Husserl's position. Merleau-Ponty inhabits the action of his own hands in a phenomenological way that instantly offers him an ordered world rather than sensorial chaos. He 'accompanies' his hands in their 'inspired exegesis' in a reflexive manner; 'How does it happen that I give to my hands, in particular, that degree, that rate, and that direction of movement that are capable of making me feel the textures of the sleek and the rough?' (1968: 133) And he tentatively presumes that

between the exploration and what it will teach me, between my movements and what I touch, there must exist some relationship by principle, some

¹⁶ This is a claim that another representative of the phenomenological tradition, Jean-Paul Sartre, qualified in his version of phenomenological ontology by claiming that it is not a primary state.

kinship, according to which they are not only, like the pseudopods of the amoeba, vague and ephemeral deformations of the corporeal space, but the initiation to and the opening upon a tactile world. (*ibid.*)

The factual condition by which the perceptual experience arises is concealed in the live flesh of the hand. Merleau-Ponty concludes:

This can happen only if my hand, while it is felt from within, is also accessible from without, itself tangible, for my other hand, for example, if it takes its place among the things it touches, *is in a sense one of them*, opens finally upon a tangible being of which it is also a part. (*ibid.*)

In the quotation above Merleau-Ponty explicitly identifies the fundamental role of a double sensation that radiates from the body towards its 'outside'. That relation between two hands belonging to the same body has a circulatory and reversible structure. In its continuous movement the wave of sensibility, at first latently enclosed in the mass of the flesh, spreads along the surface of the skin. It produces a somatic awareness in that neutral state, an internal sense of being one mass of living flesh. It seems that the internal sensation of density charged with sentience intensifies as it is approximated by the other fleshy density. In the case of double sensation this is the other hand, although it can be another body or a thing. In fact, it is the example of my left hand touching the right hand touching, or holding the thing, that particularly interests Merleau-Ponty. In this instance, the wave of sensibility breaks the limits of the skin and extends its fluid, rhythmic motion. With every wave the intensity or clarity of touching or being touched alternates and defines one hand or the other more clearly. Yet, that clarification of the roles is never complete. It recedes before it is accomplished, as the sensibility withdraws to the core of the fleshy structure of one hand while the fluid energy of the other expands.

My left hand is always on the verge of touching my right hand touching the things, but I never reach coincidence; the coincidence eclipses at the moment of realization, and one of the two things always occurs: either my right hand really passes over to the rank of touched, but then its hold on the world is interrupted; or it retains its hold on the world, but then I do not really touch *it*

– my right hand touching, I palpate with my left hand only its outer covering.
(1968: 147–48)

In the phenomenon of double sensation what is experienced is the original reflexivity of the body. This marks a significant diversion from the transcendental phenomenology of Husserl as it indicates that reflexivity is not the unique prerogative of a pure consciousness. As the prominent commentator of Merleau-Ponty's late project Renaud Barbaras states in his *The Being of the Phenomenon: Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*: 'the experience of one's own body, the apprehension of a touching right up against this body, of a touching-touched, prohibits this apprehension from being carried away beyond its incarnation and completing itself as a pure consciousness.' (2004: 154) This interplay between the sentient and the sensible destabilises the internal subject–object hierarchy. It can no longer be attributed in a fixed manner within the specific dimension of incarnation set up at the level of the hand, which is at one time being-as-touching, and at another, being-as-touched.

The ever-immanent absence of subjectivity, and the at the same time never totally fulfilled advent of its migration between exteriority and the immanence of the self compel us to acknowledge that 'one's own body reveals a self-relation that is neither identity nor difference.' (2004: 155). Furthermore, as Merleau-Ponty noted in 'The Philosopher and His Shadow', because of the 'reversibilities' between touched and touching hands, there is not—as intentionality would have it—'just the unidirectional relation of the one who perceives to what he perceives.' Merleau-Ponty's contention that there must be 'some relationship by principle, some kinship' between the movements of my hands and things translates into the assertion that possibility of the consciousness opening towards the world is afforded by the very world in which we 'subjects', along with the 'objects' of our perception, are embedded. My body connects with the things, and surely Merleau-Ponty did not think it false that, in our experience, we are confronted with objects. However, as Remy Kwant—one of the first and most influential commentators of Merleau-Ponty's later thinking—states:

With the focus of our attention only on the frontal aspects of appearing reality, we only see the opposition between the subject and object. Our eyes thus close to what Merleau-Ponty considers the most essential truth, viz., the

intrinsic connection between subject and object. The term ‘connection’ is ambiguous, since every philosopher who accepts a doctrine of intentionality will admit that subject and object are connected. Merleau-Ponty means something more. According to him the connection consists mainly in the fact that the opposed terms belong to one and the same reality. The opposition is not just a kind of unity, of togetherness, but takes place within a unity which precedes and exceeds the opposition. This unity cannot be directly observed. It is not an object itself, since it involves the subject also. It is not a phenomenon, but it co-appears in all phenomena and makes phenomena possible. It is the ‘quasi-object’ of lateral awareness. (1966: 61)

The ‘unity’ that precedes and exceeds the opposition ‘between the subject and object’ should be thought of as the primary condition rather than the effect of multidimensional connections between beings. As we will see later, this unity is not an exclusively formal structure that organises externally corporeal beings. For now, it is sufficient to say that Merleau-Ponty thought of it as a corporeal principle, since only then can we explain the process by which the perceptual relationship of the incarnated self with the things comes into being. The disclosure of the carnal principle that Merleau-Ponty arrives at as a result of the self-reflectivity of the body still occurs in the fashion of *Phenomenology of Perception*.¹⁷ The movement from the phenomenal body—or body proper—towards the deeper, corporeal tissue of the world shows a continuity of his later thinking with the earlier, more epistemologically oriented period. In fact, it appears as a necessary radicalisation of his earlier thought and, at the same time, as a faithful description of the phenomena at hand: that my body’s volitional and non-volitional actions always encounter the ‘hard’ surface of the world; my body perceives and is perceivable at every instant. Hence Merleau-Ponty asserts the existence of the carnal principle—an ‘archetype’ that conditions my body’s immersion—and the possibility of its active participation within the corporeal tissue of the world.

¹⁷ Although Merleau-Ponty was rather critical of his intentionality thesis, defined by the philosophy of consciousness, it does not seem necessary to voice a radical break between his ideas from the times of *Phenomenology of Perception* and *The Visible and Invisible*. M.C. Dillon (1988) is one of those who would rather perceive an evolution that retains some aspects of its earlier foundation. The body is after all, as Merleau-Ponty maintains, a privileged site of access to being.

If it touches them and sees them, this is only because, being of their family, itself visible and tangible, it uses its own being as a means to participate in theirs, because each of two beings is an archetype for the other, because the body belongs to the order of the things as the world is universal flesh. (1968: 137)

Hence, an incarnation of the self is not contingent on, but is the very condition of, any inner-worldly relation. The thickness of the body, enlivened by its internal core of reflexivity, does not impose an absolute distance between sensibility and the world, even if it shatters ‘the illusion of a coinciding of my perception with the things themselves.’ (1968: 8) On the contrary, Merleau-Ponty states that the same thickness of the body ‘far from rivalling that of the world’ is ‘the sole means I have to go unto the heart on the things, by making myself a world and by making them flesh.’ (1968: 135) In other words, ‘It is, precisely through that thickness, which is coessential for the body and the world, that ‘consciousness’ can open itself to the world itself.’ (Barbaras 2004: 155) It is ‘universal flesh’ that underlines the tissue of our perception.

1.3 The Flesh

The meaning of ‘Flesh’—the notion that came to denote the fundamental character of the entirety Merleau-Ponty’s later thinking—ought to be read as a palimpsest. It is created by layers of inscriptions, the erasing and crossing out of concepts sedimented in the course of his entire philosophical journey. Crucially, the itinerary of this conceptual journey is inscribed within the texture of the flesh: the flesh of the world and flesh of the body. Paradoxically, concerning the metaphor of palimpsest and the carnal structure of the world, it is inscribed deeply within the living tissue of the Flesh. At the same time it has to be read as a notion that reflects the ultimate novelty in traditional Occidental philosophy. In that respect, the chapters ‘The Intertwining – the Chiasm’ and ‘Notes’ found in Merleau-Ponty’s last text, *The Visible and the Invisible*, present themselves as a recording of the simultaneous processes of exploration and creation of the philosophical ground *in statu nascendi*. However, it could not be otherwise, given that Merleau-Ponty was just beginning to form a new, phenomenological ontology when he suddenly died. Barbaras suggests that, in the

last chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible* entitled ‘The Intertwining – the Chiasm’, the initially Husserlian notion of flesh is ‘liberated from the constitutive perspective, from recourse to ‘acts of absolute consciousness’ and acquires such an extension and radicalism that one is finally dealing with a new concept.’ (2004: 148) However, Merleau-Ponty’s preliminary use of that concept can be identified also in two other works. These are ‘The Philosopher and His Shadow’ (1964)—a lecture devoted to Husserl—and ‘Eye and Mind’ (1964), which is Merleau-Ponty’s mediation of painting.¹⁸ They are both almost contemporaneous to ‘The Intertwining – the Chiasm’. The latter text operates on the premise that the study of painting can open a gateway to the pre-theoretical terrain towards which Husserl was pointing. Consequently, the study of painting can serve as a genuine phenomenological reduction, ‘one freed of its idealistic implications’, and consequently reveal the prereflective perceptual soil.¹⁹ (2004: 148)

Sue L. Cataldi, the author of ‘Embodying Perceptions of Death: Emotional Apprehension and Reversibilities of *Flesh*’ writes:

As a philosophical expression, flesh includes but means something more than human embodiment or human flesh. Elementally, it is thought of as a generalized surface of sensibility, a “skin” or fabric into which our own enfleshed sensitivities – the sight of our eyes, the taste in our tongues, the touch in our hands – are indivisibly interwoven and enmeshed. As perceptible – perceiving fabric, flesh is two-sided; and its two sides –the sensitive and the sensed – are not thought entirely as apart from each other. The sides of perceptibility are reversible –as a jacket or the windings of the Mobius strip, so that, as “insides” and “outsides” are reversibly confused. (2000: 189–190)

At first Cataldi reminds us that the notion of flesh preserves the use of the everyday meaning of flesh as designating human flesh and human embodiment, which were indeed the meanings Merleau-Ponty elaborated in his earlier book *Phenomenology of Perception*. However, what makes this concept unique in his later thinking is its

¹⁸ Also in the collection of Merleau-Ponty’s lectures given at the College de France in 1957—1960 entitled ‘La Nature’ we find traces of a specific understanding of the notion of flesh. However, being composed from the notes of Merleau-Ponty’s students and with only some sketchy notes by the philosopher himself, we keep a critical reserve towards this source.

¹⁹ It is my contention that the similar role of phenomenological reduction can serve the study of Butoh dance.

status as a general, ontological principle that enables us to accommodate the concreteness of our ‘enfleshed sensitivity’ with the, equally concrete yet rarely discursively accessible, phenomenon of our intertwinement with the world: of our sharing in ‘the same manner of being’. Both aspects are important as only in conjunction or—to use Merleau-Pontian terminology—only as entwined can they account for the fact of our participation in the world. However, it seems that in the ontological order, it is this general sense of flesh, prescribed to the world in its totality, that must take precedence over the discrete flesh of our body. Merleau-Ponty wanted to indicate that the ontological notion of flesh is not just a generalisation of or an induction derived from the basis of our human body. The flesh of the world is not the same as the flesh of the body. (1968: 261) The main difference lies in the fact that the flesh of the world is ‘sensible and not sentient’, with the latter being the crucial characteristic of the human body. (1968: 250) However, in order to understand the genesis of a double sensation in the body, it is necessary to reverse the ‘natural’ order of explanation since ‘it is through the flesh of the world that in the last analysis one can understand the lived body’. (1968: 250). The ontology of flesh should not be a veiled form of anthropocentrism. ‘When we speak of the flesh of the visible, we do not mean to do anthropology, to describe a world covered over with all our own projections, leaving aside what it can be under the human mask.’ (1968: 136) On the contrary, it is rather the being of the subject that appears as a variant of the being of the world. Merleau-Ponty underlined this view by saying, ‘Rather, we mean that carnal being, as a being of depths, of several leaves or several faces, a being in latency, and a presentation of certain absence, is a prototype of Being, of which our body, the sensible sentient, is a very remarkable variant, but whose constitutive paradox already lies in very visible.’ (*Ibid.*) The body, as sensible–sentient, only concentrates the mystery of visibility in general and does not explain it. The paradox of a being that is at once single and double, and at the same time dispersed between the spheres of phenomenality and objectivity is not, as Merleau-Ponty attests, only a human paradox, but the paradox of Being itself.

Merleau-Ponty was well aware that by introducing the notion of ‘Flesh’ he tried to indicate something that had no name in traditional Western philosophy. For this reason, many of the initial descriptions of the notion of the Flesh are articulated in a negative form, aimed primarily at setting it apart from traditional metaphysical notions. Merleau-Ponty states that:

The flesh is not matter, in the sense of corpuscles of being which would add up or continue on one another to form beings. Nor is the visible (the things as well as my own body) some “psychic” material that would be – God knows how – brought into being by the things factually existing and acting on my factual body. In general, it is not a factor or a sum of fact “material” or “spiritual.” Nor is a representation for a mind: a mind could not be captured by its own representations; it would rebel against this insertion into the visible which essential to the seer. The flesh is not matter, is not mind, is not substance. (1968: 139).

Merleau-Ponty clearly tries to distance himself both from idealism and empiricism. When he writes that the flesh has no name in any philosophy, he means that it cannot be experienced as thought, or reduced to the theoretical (Merleau-Ponty, VI 1968: 147). But it is not quite true that it had no precedence in the history of occidental philosophy. In order to offer a positive exposition, Merleau-Ponty refers to the ancient notion of *arche* or *element*. He writes:

To designate it, we should need the old term “element”, in the sense it was used to speak of water, air, earth and fire, that is, in the sense of a *general thing*, midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea, a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being. The flesh is in this sense an “element” of Being. (1968: 139)

By evoking ancient elements: water, air, earth and fire, which no doubt have concrete, material designates in the world, Merleau-Ponty accentuates the corporeal aspect of the Flesh. Just as each of those elements refers to a concrete texture and visible appearance and movement on the surface of a particular region of Being, the flesh also sustains a visible, tactile and sensible manifestation of Being in general. We are immersed in the all-encompassing sensibility of the flesh of the world. Hence, Merleau-Ponty often uses the notion of this medium to describe our envelopment by it.

1.3.1 Flesh as medium

Flesh in its elemental sense, states Sue L. Cataldi, is ‘precessive and progenitive’. By that she means that, ‘Flesh is always already There; and it functions in the ontology as a source’ (1993: 60). Merleau-Ponty conveys this sense by describing it as ‘the formative medium of the subject and object’ and ‘the inauguration of the where and the when.’ (Cataldi 1993: 60; Merleau-Ponty 1968: 140). In other places Merleau-Ponty describes flesh as a voluminous medium, as undifferentiated, thick and dark. This description is reminiscent of the ancient concept *apeiron*, coined by Anaximander. Emmanuel Levinas first revisits it in *Totality and Infinity* where he designates it an original site of sensibility:

There is also an unformed prime matter. Sensibility occurs in a medium which is pure depth, but not empty space; filled with qualitative opacity. It has no contours, does not present itself through profiles, does not have sides, is depth without surfaces. It is neither delimited, nor positively without limit: it is indefinite, *apeiron*. (Levinas 1979: 141)

Alphono Lingis is a great advocate of the sensuous interpretation of the flesh. Hence, he elaborates further on its ‘elemental’ nature in a language perhaps even more evocative than Merleau-Ponty’s. He first tries to capture its temporal ‘side’, referring to its ability to rarefy time through the ‘prism’ of its own density, to indiscriminately saturate the space with a temporal flow:

It presents itself through pure qualities, which do not qualify any substrate. Pure chaos, pure flux, it is present through constant oncoming. It fills out a space-time presence, marks a presence with its density, through condensation and rarefaction, blotting out the wake of the passed through, obscuring the horizons of the future. In it all directions are equivalent and neutral; the present does not adumbrate the absent, the absent does not promise the present. It extends a sphere of presence, within which one can move indefinitely without diminution or loss. It has no orientation – no sense. It is not going anywhere. But it is immediately there. (Lingis 1986: 64)

In its generative potential, it is defined by its depth, its verticality and by layer upon layer of sensuous texture. Lingis maintains that ‘things take form neither in the emptiness of space, nor out of a field of potential things. Colours concretize in a chromatic medium, solids and vapours form in the density, sounds emerge in the sonorous element.’ (1986: 65) He finds confirmation in Merleau-Ponty’s words ‘this red emerges from less precise, more general redness, in which my gaze was caught, into which it sank, before—as we put it so aptly—fixing it.’ (1968: 131)

The totality of the sensuous being precedes our perceptual engagement, not to mention the decisions we make. Lingis reiterates and develops Merleau-Ponty’s words,

There was first this sensuous element, formless as a sea, dense as a sea, into which the gaze sank. The things do not crystallise along the axes of space-time framework, or at the intersections of instrumental pathways; they solidify in a depth – in the day, in the atmosphere, in the density and din of the world. (1986: 65)

Then, in an attempt to demonstrate the sensuous manifestation of the flesh of the world, Lingis abandons both the abstract vocabulary of the ontology and the metaphorical language of poetry. Lingis gives an example of light as being such a medium:

it envelops us, and extends neither infinitely nor unto frontiers – nor does it have horizons. It dilates, fills a clearing, dikes off the darkness, which it hides with the incessance of its presence. The light is without parts, without sides, without contours, without profiles, without referentiality, without substance. It is like an adjective predicated of nothing. The night, opaque and full of the dark, is such an element, general thing that fills space, that draws one’s gaze, one’s hearing into its somber spaciousness without sites or axes. (1986: 65)

Eugene Minkowski offers an equally suggestive analysis of the almost ‘substantial’ opacity of darkness in his *Lived Time* (1970). He there distinguishes between two kinds of space: dark and clear. He makes a crucial observation concerning our perceptual situation in the world, which is never just perceptual:

Clarity is not the only fundamental substance of life; we also live in the night. Isn't it necessary, perchance, to turn our eyes toward it? But I no longer have the black night, complete obscurity *before me*; instead, it covers me completely, it penetrates my whole being, it *touches* me in a much more intimate way than the clarity of visual space. (1970: 406)

The darkness of the night abolishes our perception of space modelled on data delivered by vision exercised on a bright day. The vectors of length and breadth are no longer a means of orientation. We feel, rather than see, 'pure' depth. Depth becomes a primordial dimension of our contact with the world although, as Minkowski and Merleau-Ponty both agree, it does not do so on a spatial level. Dark space—or pure depth—creates an intimate space and, as Merleau-Ponty observes in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962), it challenges my individuality:

Night is not an object before me; it envelops me and infiltrates through all my senses, stifling my recollections and almost destroying my personal identity. I am no longer withdrawn into my perceptual lookout from which I watch the outlines of the objects moving at a distance. Night has no outlines; it is itself in contact with me and its unity is the mystical unity of the *mana*... it is pure depth without foreground or background, without surfaces and without any distance separating it from me. (1962: 283)

Once I lose the measurable distance between myself and the object, I lose the object. And once I lose the object in front of me, I lose my identity. The outlines of the things are also imperceptible and the outlines of my objective body are similarly blurred. In this instance it is my felt or lived body that expands into the space. My personal flesh encroaches on the density of the space and I discover that there is an affinity between us. I can no longer distinguish myself from the space surrounding me. I mingle with the space that infiltrates me. Merleau-Ponty points out that the depth of darkness is not perceived at a distance, as something I hold 'in front of me'. And yet, we do perceive it as a sort of density or materiality or tangibility; 'one in which I am enveloped and by which I am immediately, and intimately, touched.' (Cataldi 1993: 49). Minkowski clarifies the aspect of 'materiality' of dark space, or

pure depth, in Merleau-Ponty's vocabulary, which underlines the positive sense of darkness in contrast with the view that would present it only as an absence of light:

Certainly, the dark night is not taken here in the sense of absence of light, or the impossibility of seeing; it is taken in the positive value – in its materiality, we would almost like to say – and as such it is much more material, much more tangible, and even more penetrating than the limpid clarity of visual space. ... The dark night also has something more personal about it... it is more 'mine' than clear space... penetrating to the very depths of our being. (1970: 405)

But, it is not only light and darkness that disclose space as a more general manifestation of the flesh in its elemental sense.²⁰ As Lingis writes:

The ground is also such an adjective, a support without substrate, a depth beneath all things, sustaining every scene and every upright or unstable object, a presence everywhere felt, which neither approaches nor withdraws from, since one needs its support in order to approach or pull back. [...] The heat, the monsoon, is neither a thing nor a field for things; it is a qualitative intensity without structure, a clarity without distinctness, tropical element. (1986: 65)

Finally this elemental character of flesh does not only manifest itself in those overwhelming phenomena of nature, like the ground, heat and monsoons. It also resonates powerfully in the incarnate subject, conceived as an interface between the ideas of the cultural world and the singular things of the natural world. As Lingis—in

²⁰ Equally, the experience of scuba diving could provide us with an interesting insight into some aspects of our spatial perception. Because of the nature of the medium of water, my visual and tactile perceptions are changed. First—together with the rocks, fish and other creatures—what is given to me is the medium itself. Unlike the air above the surface, which is in most cases transparent and invisible, water never ceases to be perceived. In fact, water and things and the creatures in it are always given simultaneously. Second, the tactile sensation—which is something that would correspond to 'feeling the depth of darkness'—reveals the depth of the medium to me (I do not mean here the distance from the surface of the water). Significantly, however, my sensitivity to the corpuscular tension of this medium is enhanced and with it the ability to sense very subtle waves created by the moving water and the animals living in the sea. The experience of scuba diving not only enhances a tactile sphere of our perception but also the visual sphere. This example provides a better understanding of what Merleau-Ponty means when he says that 'vision is a sort of touch.'

an exemplary act of a chiasmatic reading of Merleau-Ponty and Levinas—attests, a perceptual experience discloses our mutual intertwinement with both realms:

Ex-istence, that is, transcending one's here-now, becoming general, becoming a level or a schema or a dimension, is not only a property of the mind – or it is the property of the mind because the sensitive mind is sensible, and this schematising oneself, this veering into generality, is the nature of all that is sensible. Points become pivots, lines become levels, planes become horizons. But in addition, things grasped, when let go, revert to the elemental. (1986:133)

When we are in our natural state, or animated by reflexive awareness, we are inclined to sustain the bond between our incarnated selves and the same sensible texture of the world. We do not inhabit the empty spaces furnished by solitary objects located along the axes of geometrical lines but rather, we feel ourselves filled by the continuum of the sensible and ideal facets of the things, always coming together. Merleau-Ponty wondered over the potency of the redness 'filling in' so many artefacts and natural objects alike; and even non-material—although no less real—events, such as wars and revolutions. I cannot tell any more where this intense, multidimensional connectivity originates. I submerge myself in its depth, where its levels mix and I inhabit it. Or rather, I realise that I if I was able to encounter any manifestation of redness at all, then I was always already inhabiting it. The density of this interrelation springs from an ongoing process with which, over time, I must have become intertwined with more and more of its innumerable dimensions, sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously. Lingis demonstrates further instances of this all-encompassing nature of participation in the element of Being:

The red of the blood, out of the excess of its redness, does not only become the level against which the other colours situate themselves; it becomes the element in which crimes, lusts, landscapes, wars, revolutions swim and are caught sight of. The solidity of the ground, paced off after the sea voyage, a crust, remains as the element in which solid things are posited. The savour of the wine turns into an element in which vitality surges. The sparkle of the day turns into a medium in which the look is buoyed up, borne from plane to

plane, from visible to visible. In the core of the things one senses the element. One sinks one's teeth into fruit, and discovers the nutritive element; one samples the liquid and joins the flux of the alimentary, general and undivided, a depth sounding into the sensuous. (1986: 66)

Ultimately, even by yielding to the most rudimentary urge for food and drink that brings nourishment to my organism I confirm my embeddedness in, and my unceasing dependence on, the elemental, sensuous soil of the world.

The world is not a collection of the separate, hard things filling the space, nor is the cultural world a collection of ideas independent from the material realm. Rather, every colour—and every visible thing in general—is a sort of straits between exterior horizons and interior horizons ever gaping open. It is diacritical relation that evokes phenomena into being and that solidifies in a momentary crystallisation of the interplay between interior and exterior horizons. And yet, it is precisely this enigmatic difference without substance—this intensification—that favours the presence that Merleau-Ponty calls 'a flesh of things'; the formative tissue of 'all the colours and visibles', which 'lines them, sustains them, nourishes them'. (1968: 132–133)

1.3.2 Structural aspects of Flesh

Flesh operates on many dimensions, or rather, across the boundaries of every possible dimension, at their intersections, or in the gaps between them. Flesh is a dense space of 'in-betweenness.'²¹ It functions as a sort of connective tissue between every region of Being. (1968: 131) This should be taken in a twofold sense, as Merleau-Ponty articulates, 'a general being, midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea.' Therefore, just like the ancient elements, Flesh indicates an

²¹ Although Merleau-Ponty left no indication as to the Oriental inspiration of this notion, and we have no reason to assume that there were any, some contemporary commentators suggest that 'Flesh' bears resemblance to some concepts of Eastern philosophy, such as Chinese Tao and Japanese 'Ma' meaning 'space-in-between' in Japanese. It is partly for this reason that I think Merleau-Ponty's *Ontology of Flesh* could enter into dialogue with the practice of Butoh dance, which is permeated by traditional Japanese philosophy. Sue L. Cataldi, *Emotion, Depth, And Flesh: A Study of Sensitive Space: Reflections on Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Embodiment* (Albany: State University of New York, 1993).

invisible dynamism, a principle of change and transformation, but also a force of dispersion and encroachment.

Not a fact or a sum of facts, and yet adherent to *location* and to the *now*. Much more: the inauguration of the *where* and the *when*, the possibility and exigency for the fact; in a word: facticity, what makes the fact be a fact. And, at the same time, what makes the facts have meaning, makes the fragmentary facts dispose themselves about “something”. (1968:139–140)

In the previous section was exposed the unitary facet of Flesh via its sensuous ‘*hyle*’. In this section I will undertake to reveal the internal structure of Flesh. We must ask, how it is possible that Flesh inaugurates the facts? What structural element or process enlivens its dynamism so that it can make the fact—any fact—become a fact? How can the individual things, including the body, be carved out of the continuous texture of Being? How can I account for the irrevocable difference between the flesh of the world and the flesh of my body? In order to answer these question we must, as Merleau-Ponty suggests, undertake the project of ontology conceived as *intra-ontology*. (1968: 227, 237, 244).

Merleau-Ponty describes the flesh as ‘the coiling over of the visible upon the seeing body, of the tangible upon the touching body’. (1968: 146) Flesh, in its formative or generative sense, creates some distance from itself by folding over upon itself and ‘hollowing out’ a clearing that becomes an inauguration of the percipience; the region of Being within which perception arises out of the perceptible. It is at first a primordial act of ‘reversibility’ of the Flesh in which it manifests its self-reflexivity. This is the beginning of the emergence of self-reflectivity. It finds an intermediate fulfilment in the ‘kind of reflection’ of the double sensation of the touching hands, while its full accomplishment is realised on ‘the other side of the body’, that is, the mind. (1968: 259) That, however, is only achieved after a long maturation process of ‘labouring on itself’ when the Flesh—this ‘interiorly-worked over mass’—self-diverges or opens itself-up through a self-distancing. (1968: 145) Sometimes Merleau-Ponty calls this process ‘*écart*’ (a stepping aside, or deviation) in which the Flesh begins to hollow itself out, or ‘coil over’ on itself to create an ‘other’ side to itself. From the element of Flesh as an original, undifferentiated, dense, ‘dark’, medium, the percipience arises. It is imagined as a ‘dehiscence’, that is

as bursting forth or splitting open, in the way that seed pods do. The question could be asked why this event occurs at all. Merleau-Ponty did not believe that it is a contingent act. He stated: ‘The flesh (of the world or my own) is not contingency or chaos, but a texture that returns to itself and conforms to itself.’ (1968: 146) If we recall earlier descriptions of an auto-dynamic aspect of Flesh as ‘interiorly-worked over mass’ or ‘labouring on itself’, then we may have a clue as to the ‘why’ of the occurrence of ‘dehiscence’. Cataldi suggests that it is due to ‘the animation or motion of these “folds” or “fissure” in the “fabric” of “Flesh”’.

The above account of ‘perceptual opening’ within the element of Flesh suggests that there are two parallel processes that inaugurate the diversity of the flesh of the world and the flesh of sensible-sentients.²² On the one hand there is a negativity principle, that of *écart*—a dissemination that creates a hollow within the texture of Flesh. In this sense the negativity principle sets the whole process in motion.²³ It loosens the opacity of the original Flesh and creates the field of reciprocity between the now dispersed sides of Flesh. Within that fissure the spheres of sensibility open and proto-reflectivity emerges. In that instance, and by distancing itself somewhat from its own occlusive voluminosity, Flesh begins to touch, see, hear, smell, and taste itself, and eventually it begins to understand or become aware of itself.

On the other hand, those crystallisations of the visible and tangible—the things in the space of the ‘perceptual opening’—are always contained within the medium of Flesh defined as depth. It is the depth of the Flesh from which the sensible and sentient are carved out and which guarantees their identity:

Without it, there would be not a world or Being, there would be only a mobile zone of distinctness which could not be brought here without quitting all the rest—and a “synthesis” of these “views”. Whereas, by virtues of depth, they coexist in degrees of proximity, they slip into another and integrate themselves. It is hence because of depth that the things have flesh:

²² In French: *sentants-sensibles*. Sue L. Cataldi uses the term ‘perceptible-percipients’. Each of the translations has its pros and cons. In my opinion, however, the latter translation suggests too close an affinity with the primacy of the of ‘intentionality thesis’ found in *Phenomenology of Perception*, whilst ‘*sensible-sentients*’ operates along the axis of corporeality, which fits better within the framework defined by the elemental Flesh.

²³ Here we could note Hegel’s and perhaps also Sartre’s influence on Merleau-Ponty.

that it, opposes to my inspection obstacles, a resistance which is precisely their reality, their “openness”, their *totum simul*. (1968: 219)

This interplay between internal dissemination, or *écart*, and the density of the depth of the flesh has been branded by Merleau-Ponty the idea of ‘proximity through distance’. (1968: 127)

1.3.3 Chiasm²⁴

One of Merleau-Ponty’s major contributions in his later years was the initiation of a study of chiasm as the deepest universal mode of relation or binding, rather than what we have regularly taken to be structure, system, synthesis, order, logic, or causality. (Mallin in Petersma 1989: 219)

The notion of chiasm, having its origin in the natural sciences, and particularly biology, induces the idea of the universal mode of relation as embedded in Nature.²⁵ It is precisely this notion that explains the sense of intertwinement between individual, corporeal beings, fragments of the world and the world itself. It indicates the space, the crisscrossing, between the flesh of my body and the flesh of the world. It is simultaneously the space where the binding between the elements occurs and the structure that rules the mode of interaction between the regions of Being as reversibility. But the intertwining at the chiasm also refers to the relation between the two sides of bodily being. It is evident to Merleau-Ponty that our bodily flesh has a

²⁴ Merleau-Ponty uses the French word ‘*chiasme*’ for the Greek ‘*khiasmos*,’ which means ‘a crosswise arrangement’. ‘*Khiasmos*’ carries two meanings in both French and English. In French, it is the *rhetorical* meaning of *khiasmos* (for example, ‘To stop too fearful, and too faint to go’, where the second phrase inverts the grammatical order of the first) that is designated by ‘*chiasme*’—Merleau-Ponty’s choice—and by ‘chiasmus’ (chiasmi for the plural, ‘chiastic’ for the adjective) in English. The French use the word ‘*chiasma*’ for the *anatomical* meaning of ‘*khiasmos*’ (the crisscrossing of the optic nerves in the brain); in English, this meaning is also designated by ‘chiasma’ (‘chiasmata in the plural, and ‘chiasmatic’ for the adjective) or simply by ‘chiasm’. Although Merleau-Ponty chooses the French word that corresponds to the rhetorical employment of ‘*khiasmos*’—and does so perhaps because it comes closest to capturing the notion of ‘reversibility’ that is central to his idea of ‘flesh’—the convention among English commentators has been to assume that Merleau-Ponty intended to use the anatomical, rather than the rhetorical meaning, hence the use of the term ‘chiasm’. After an introduction by Fred Evans and Leonard Lawlor, *Chiasms. Merleau-Ponty’s Notion of Flesh*, ed. Fred Evans and Leonard Lawlor (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000).

²⁵ Interestingly Deleuze and Guattari also refer to the biological order when they explore the notion of ‘rhizome’ as designating a flexible way of interconnection. However, it seems to me that such claims, underlining the natural origins of relations on the ontological level do so only in a very general sense.

sentient side, a ‘double belongingness’ to the ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’ orders. It became manifest that when we are in the act of reflective awareness we inhabit an interaction between our two hands. At that time we focused more on the mode of our attention and the emergence of bodily reflection. Having established that, however, we can attend to the ‘intra-ontological’ aspects of that event which in Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of the Flesh is described as a ‘system’ of the interconnected notions of chiasm and reversibility.

Merleau-Ponty models the chiasm, or the intertwining of the sensible and sentient sides of the body—that is, their unity—on an analogy with our visual system. In the act of seeing binocular disparities between the two, the spatially segregated sides of the same visual field are in a relation of mutual superimposition. Merleau-Ponty uses numerous terms to capture this phenomenon: overlapping; encroaching upon; slipping; or crossing over into each other. However, just as the unified vision is ‘an effect’ of spatially segregated eyes nevertheless ‘belonging to’ the same visual system, the two sides of the body are kept together ‘as *two* sides of the *same* (unified) body only because they *are* somewhat spatially segregated or from each other’. Here, once again, we came across the importance of the gap, the spatial *écart*, but this time it is pronounced within the unified, sentient body.

However, chiasm also has a meaning other than a ‘bond’ between the sentient and sensible within the framework of the ontology of flesh. As Merleau-Ponty states in his *Working Notes*, it is also a ‘medium of exchange’ between the self and the others and, as such, it contributes to his notion of ‘intercorporeality’:

like the chiasm of the eyes, this one is also what makes us belong to the same world – a world which is not projective, but forms its unity across impossibilities such as that of *my* world and the world of the other – – By reason of this mediation through reversal, this chiasm, there is not simply a for-Oneself for-the-Other antithesis, there is Being as containing all that, first as sensible Being and then as Being without restriction (1968: 215)

The above description presents a vision of chiasm as a universal co-functioning, and designates a medium where a certain notion of Being emerges. We function as one unique body—we are, to be sure, grounded in an elemental Flesh—yet we are already ‘migrating into another sort of flesh’:

The chiasm is not only a me–other exchange (the messages he receives reach me, the messages I receive reach him), it is also an exchange between me and my world, between the phenomenal body and the ‘objective’ body, between the perceiving and the perceived: what begins as a thing ends as consciousness of the thing, what begins as a “state of consciousness” ends as a thing. (1968: 215)

Clearly the above meaning of chiasm takes us to another realm, away from the intra-ontological dimension and towards the social dimension of our existence.

1.3.4 Reversibility

Reversibility is another characterisation of Flesh, which Merleau-Ponty considered, in the last sentence of the chapter ‘The intertwining – The Chiasm’, to be ‘the ultimate truth.’ (1968: 155) We have already analysed the original instance of reversibility, when Flesh folds back on itself, and creates distance from itself through openings of percipience. This distance effects the miracle of Perception; the ability of the Flesh to see, hear, touch, smell and taste itself. This originary proto-reversibility becomes the source of Merleau-Ponty’s reversibility thesis. The basis of the relation of reversibility, as experienced in perceptual life, is rather simple: it is that I can see and that I am also seen; that I can touch and that I am also touched. I am both subject and object through the acts of seeing and touching or, in a modified sense, through the act of any of the senses. There is, however, more to it than this. Reversibility teaches that each element, act or—more generally—any relatum of the relation is diacritically defined by the other terminus. Merleau-Ponty states that:

reversibility, is the idea that every perception is doubled with a counter perception...., is an act with two faces, one no longer knows who speaks and who listens. Speaking-listening, seeing-being seen, perceiving-being perceived circularity (it is because of it that it seems to us that perception forms itself in *the things themselves*.) – – Activity=passivity. (1968: 264–265)

Sue L. Cataldi identifies three different senses of reversibility in *The Visible and The Invisible*. In the first sense, reversible flesh is thought of as analogous to reversible fabric. Another interpretation of reversibility is as becoming: as a relation of a partial complementary identification of the ‘sides’ of perceptibility. A third construes reversibility as a translation—as a communication holding between different realms or modes of perceptual experience. The first sense is illustrated by the example of a glove. Merleau-Ponty concludes that each side of the glove offers us access to the other side without the need of ‘a spectator that would be on *each side*’. (Merleau-1968: 263). By virtue of the adherence of one to the other, I can touch one side through the other.

The second sense of reversibility, construed as ‘becoming’, is modelled on a circle of touching hands, where each hand can change places with the other. My ‘touching’, ‘active’ hand can ‘reverse’ or become the hand that is touched and vice versa. There is also an instance of inter-perceptual complementary doublings or reversibilities. This takes place when I see and touch the same object. The density of my flesh permits that both of these sensorial impressions create one system: a system of equivalences, in which my seeing and touching merge and one morphs into the other. The reversibility of any perceptible circle of one sphere—whether it be vision or touch—is never entirely self-contained or closed off from any other. They overlap according to the logic of the chiasm, which functions as a space where the axes of reversibility cross over.

Finally, the sense of reversibility in terms of ‘translation’ applies to exchanges of overlapping ‘communication’ between differentiated perceptual modes. Merleau-Ponty gives an example of our seeing and touching being reversible and their data translatable because my seeing ‘can see’ whether something will be smooth or rough to my touch. That is, my vision can see tactile differences, which means that it can translate a ‘purely tactile’ impression into its ‘visual language’—the latter being a metaphorical expression. Similarly, I can feel what I see. The strong sunrays touch my eyes in a painful way. I can feel that the receptivity level for my vision has been exceeded and it is the tactile sphere that engages with the strong energy of sun. It is almost as if one sphere of my perceptual system is protected by the other. Surely there is no need for a conscious awareness to be engaged in that

situation. Hence, tactility and visibility intertwine. Merleau-Ponty stresses that fact when he says:

We must habituate ourselves to think that every visible is cut out in tangible, every tactile being in some manner promised to visibility, and that there is encroachment, infringement, not only between the touched and the touching, but also between the tangible and the visible, which is encrusted in it, as conversely, the tangible itself is not a nothingness of visibility, it not without visual existence. (1968: 134)

Extra-sensorial and intra-sensorial reversibility, whether in the sense of ‘becoming’ or ‘translation’, are both possible because the spheres of perceptibility share the common space of the chiasm. And yet, due to the nature of this medium, its density is obtained from the original Flesh. Those translations are never perfect, and the morphing of one into another is never complete. Coincidence never occurs. ‘There is double and crossed situating of the visible in the tangible and of the tangible in the visible; the two maps are complete, and yet they do not merge into one. The two parts are total parts and yet are not superposable.’ (1968: 134)

Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty emphasises that reversibility, although always imminent, is never realised in fact. Referring once again to the case of the touching hands he says:

My left hand is always on the verge of touching my right hand touching the things, but I never reach coincidence; the coincidence eclipses at the moment of realisation, and one of the two things always occurs: either my right hand really passes over to the rank of touched, but then its hold on the world is interrupted; or it retains its hold on the world, but then I do not really touch *it*. (1968: 148)

Yet, Cataldi contends that ‘reversibility’s incompleteness is not a failure’, and neither is it ‘a shortcoming of Merleau-Ponty’s “reversibility thesis”’. It is precisely this temporal and spatial gap between the two sides of the flesh of the body that guarantees the body’s openness to other beings. The incompleteness of the reversibility is a reminder of the original dehiscence; the hollowing of the Flesh. It is

in the moment that the chiasm creates an obstacle in the internal circle of the body's perceptibility that it secures its embeddedness with the world. The boundaries between the world and the body must exist and yet they are always blurred, even within the body itself:

if these experiences never exactly overlap, if they slip away at the very moment they are about to rejoin, if there is always a "shift", a "spread", between them, this is precisely because my two hands are part of the same body, because it moves itself in the world, because I hear myself from within and from without. I experience—and as often as I wish—the transition and the metamorphosis of the one experience into the other, and it is only as though the hinge between them, solid, unshakeable, remained irremediably hidden from me. But this hiatus between my voice heard and my voice uttered, between one moment of my tactile life and the following one, is not an ontological void, a non-being: it is spanned by the total being of my body, and by that of the world; it is the zero pressure between two solids that makes them adhere to one another. (1968: 148)

It is worth mentioning that in his working notes, Merleau-Ponty sometimes identified reversibility with chiasm. This could be confusing. Sue Cataldi clarifies this by saying that, 'reversibility is a relation of doubling that occurs *at* chiasms. Reversibilities can occur between the sides of the Flesh only because they intermingle at chiasm.' (1993: 75) As we have already explained, chiasm is a space of crossing-over. It is the space that lies between the encroaching and intermingling 'sides' of Perceptibility: 'the space that holds them together, the space where sides of flesh reverse'. But it is crucial to be aware that the chiasm does not itself 'reverse'. The chiasm does not 'become' or 'translate' into another side because, as Cataldi stresses, '*it is not, itself, a side*, but that which lies, as a bond, a "vinculum" *between* them and that which makes them possible.' (1993: 75)

And yet, chiasm may be identified with the incompleteness of the reversibility of the Flesh insofar as chiasm is the 'spread', the 'hiatus', or the eclipsed 'betweenness', that distances the 'sides' of the Flesh from each other.

With this qualified or, rather, contextualised equivalence of the incompleteness of reversibility with the chiasm, and by simultaneously conceiving of

chiasm in terms of thickness or ‘pulp’ of the Flesh, Merleau-Ponty managed, in Cataldi’s opinion, ‘with his thesis of *incomplete* reversibility of the Flesh, to think proximity and distance together, as “mutually synonymous.”’ (1993: 76)

We understand then why we see the things themselves, in their places, where they are, according to their being which is indeed more than their being perceived – and why at the same time we are separated from them by all the thickness of the look and of the body; it is that this distance is not the contrary of this proximity, it is deeply consonant with it, it is synonymous with it. It is that the thickness of flesh between the seer and the thing is constitutive for the thing of its visibility as for the seer of his corporeity; it is not an obstacle between them, it is their means of communication. (1968: 135)

This idea of proximity through distance operates on an intra-ontological level and provides framework for further analysis of Merleau-Ponty’s notion of intercorporeality. This would not exist without the structure of chiasm and reversibility articulating Being in its sensible element, the Flesh. The ground is now prepared for direct engagement with the phenomenon of intercorporeality.

1.4 Intercorporeality

To begin with, I propose an initial formulation of *intercorporeality* as denoting a latent connection or—to use Merleau-Ponty’s expression—an intertwining between my body-mind and the body-mind of the other, enacted on a somatic level and enabled by an underlying transfer of the corporeal schema. Intercorporeality is at the same time, according to Merleau-Ponty’s ontology, predicated upon primordial *Flesh*—a term designating a material principle of Being, structurally characterised by reversibility and dehiscence²⁶. The latter part of the formulation underlines its ontological dimension, which is unearthed on the level of a passive responsivity of individual flesh and is brought to the surface of embodied consciousness as a somatic awareness.

²⁶ Gap; [*écart* in French] Dehiscence or gap is not a vacuum, but a space of intensity, of crossing and of exchange. This is the same for the micro scale of ontological structures as for the macro scale of moving, walking, dancing, i.e. living bodies.

It has to be pointed that the notion of intercorporeality had not reached conceptual maturity within Merleau-Ponty's late philosophy. Merleau-Ponty's premature death meant that the entire project was left unfinished. However, it undoubtedly occupies a significant position in the densely knitted conceptual network that establishes the ontology of flesh, and it is a particularly privileged voice in the dialogue between Merleau-Ponty's philosophical project and the practice of performing arts in Butoh dance. Since Merleau-Ponty mentions 'intercorporeality' only twice in *The Visible and the Invisible*, I will quote both passages in order to provide a preliminary understanding of the context in which Merleau-Ponty locates this notion and the double sense it acquires. I will argue that the influence of 'intercorporeality' spreads beyond its literal use, and that its elaboration often proceeds in parallel with the notion of flesh. The first mention of intercorporeality is found in the following passage:

If we can show that the flesh is an ultimate notion, that it is not the union or compound of two substances, but thinkable by itself, if there is a relation of the visible with itself that traverses me and constitutes me as a seer, this circle which I do not form, which forms me, this coiling over of the visible upon the visible, can traverse, animate other bodies as well as my own. And if I was able to understand how this wave arises within me, how the visible which is yonder is simultaneously my landscape, I can understand a fortiori that elsewhere it also closes over upon itself and there is other landscape besides my own. If it lets itself be captivated by one of its fragments, the principle of captation is established, the field open for other Narcissus, for an '*intercorporeity*'. (1968: 140–141; my italics)

The second time it appears is in its adjective form, predicated upon *being*:

What is open to us, therefore, with the reversibility of the visible and tangible, is – if not the incorporeal – at least an *intercorporeal being*, a presumptive domain of the visible and the tangible, which extends further than the things I touch and see at present.' (1968: 142–143; my italics)

Each passage sheds light on a slightly different facet of the phenomenon of intercorporeality. Although I will not undertake an analysis of these meanings at this point—that will follow in the latter part of this section—I want to emphasise that both aspects are crucial for the preservation of the unique sense that intercorporeality opens before us in the context of embodied being-in-the-world. The first passage presents a narrower sense of intercorporeality, enabling a specifically human, intersubjective, experience. In that context it has close ties with the earlier notion of a ‘corporeal schema’ or, to be precise, with the transfer of the corporeal schema between human subjects. In the light of this characterisation ‘intercorporeality’ could be used as synonymous with the notion of ‘corporeal intersubjectivity’. (Kozel 2007: 240) I will argue that the latter passage points to intercorporeality in a general sense, evoking a connection with the elemental sense of the Flesh. This is intercorporeality as a general style, extending across the sensible being, ‘a carnal adherence of the sentient to the sensed and of the sensed to the sentient’ (1968: 142). This opens before us the entire sensuous world, the domain of the non-human or—as David Abram calls it in *The Spell of the Sensuous*— the ‘more-than-human world’. They are not disjunctive and it is certainly not my intention to advocate that these are two radically different phenomena. In essence, the elemental trait of intercorporeality enables, in a general sense, the manifestation of intersubjectivity as ‘corporeal intersubjectivity’. I want to point to a certain dynamism, a movement within the very structure of the notion itself, which corresponds with the nature of the phenomenon of intercorporeality.

Terminological clarification: ‘intercorporeity’ and ‘intercorporeality’

In the French originals of *Le Visible et l’invisible* (1964); *Résumés de courses. Collège de France, 1952–1960* (1968); and *La Nature: Notes, cours du Collège de France* (1995), Merleau-Ponty introduced the new notion of using ‘*intercorporéité*’ as a noun with ‘*intercorporel*’ in its adjective form. The English translations—entitled *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968); *Themes from the Lectures at the Collège de France* (1970); and *Nature: Course Notes from Collège de France* (2003)—render these terms, correspondingly, as ‘intercorporeity’ and ‘intercorporeal’. Both of these words are direct translations from the French, and just as in French, they are composites of the words ‘inter’ and ‘corporeity’ (fr.

corporéité) and ‘corporeal’ (fr. *corporel*). These, in turn, have a Latin origin, ‘*inter*’, meaning ‘in between; among’ and ‘*corpus*’ meaning ‘body’. In *The Oxford English Dictionary* (2001, 2nd ed.) we find the following definitions of the aforementioned terms:

Corporeal – of the nature of body, bodily, physical. 1. Of the nature of the animal body as opposed to the spirit. 2. Of the nature of matter; material.

Corporeality – the quality or state of being corporeal; bodily form or nature; materiality.

Corporeity – [adaptation of medieval Latin *corporeitās*, *f.corpore-us*] 1.The being of the nature of body; the quality of being, or having, a material body. 2. Bodily substance.

As we can see, all three notions are closely related. They all denote the quality of materiality, refer to the concept of matter, and they are effectively treated as synonyms in English. However, there is a hint of difference in their respective definitions which, I claim, is significant in the context of our analysis of the notion of ‘intercorporeality’. The notion ‘corporeal’ contains a reference to the nature of an animal body, that is, a living body. It denotes the nature of the body that refers not just to the material body but that displays—depending on the developmental stage—various degrees of perception; response to external stimuli; and self-locomotion. Consequently ‘corporeality’ would designate a being that exists in a way that is characteristic of living bodies and that possesses the aforementioned attributes of perception, response, self-motion etc. ‘Corporeity’, by contrast, seems to define a domain of inanimate beings but also, as the second entry states, ‘bodily substance’ suggesting a reference to the elemental character of such a domain. The first definition closely corresponds with biology, taking the traditional delineation of that scientific discipline. The latter belongs to the field of physics. I insist that both aspects are crucial, even though they are not particularly exposed in the language of traditional philosophy. Merleau-Ponty’s introduction of the concept of ‘intercorporeality’ both preserved and went beyond the simple combination of traditional definitions of the prefix ‘inter’ with either ‘corporeity’ or ‘corporeality’. It is indeed their semantic intertwining that marks the particular character of the notion of intercorporeality in Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of flesh. It is the stand of

phenomenological ontology that allows not so much a combination of both aspects as the unearthing of the semantic content that is the matrix of the latter, scientific, division.

The introduction and analysis, above, of the dictionary definitions of the notions of ‘corporeality’ and ‘corporeity’ is a preliminary step for explaining my choice in using the term ‘intercorporeality’ rather than ‘intercorporeity’. This term did not feature either in the French originals or in their English translations of Merleau-Ponty’s texts. Contemporary scholars engaging directly with or appropriating Merleau-Ponty’s later thinking predominantly chose to use the notion ‘intercorporeality’²⁷. The reason for this—as will be argued in more detail in the course of this section—is that ‘corporeality’ and, by extension, ‘intercorporeality’, frames the region of the relationship between lived bodies. This renders the term ‘intercorporeality’ highly appropriate for use in the analysis of relationships between human subjects. In other words, it can be used in the discourse revolving around the broadly defined themes of embodiment and subjectivity. My decision is therefore far from arbitrary, and it follows the predilection of contemporary scholarship. However, my use of the notion of ‘intercorporeality’ stems foremost from my own critical interpretation of Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of flesh. I use the term ‘intercorporeality’ because according to my methodological stance, it is my lived body that is the privileged point of departure—a vehicle for participation in the world. But we are,—as many of Merleau-Ponty’s analyses of our visual, tactile, reversible interactions with the world of inanimate objects testify—embedded in elemental corporeity. The so far only superficially sketched sense of Merleau-Ponty’s original ‘intercorporeity’ should not be forgotten. My use of ‘intercorporeality’ is therefore predicated on the preservation of both meanings of the original French ‘*intercorporéité*’.²⁸

²⁷ M. C. Dillon, (1998). *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology* (2nd Edition ed.). Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press. Kozel, S. (2007); *Closer: Performance, Technologies, Phenomenology*. Cambridge, MA and London: Massachusetts Institute of Technology; D. M. Levin, (1985). *The Body's Recollection of Being: Phenomenological Psychology and the Deconstruction of Nihilism*. London, Boston, Melbourne and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul; Gail Weiss (1999). *Body Images: Embodiment as Intercorporeality*. New York and London: Routledge. ; Vasseleu, C. (1998); *Textures of Light. Vision and Touch in Irigaray, Levinas and Merleau-Ponty*. London and New York: Routledge

²⁸ I must admit that my predilection for ‘intercorporeality’ has also another, partly visual, partly quasi-linguistic reason. In contrast to the orthodox linguistic analysis of its Latin and French origins, the word ‘intercorporeality’ allows us to distinguish three semantic components: ‘inter’ designating relationship, being in-between; ‘corpo’, giving a hint of the Latin ‘corpus’; and ‘reality’, which points

Merleau-Ponty arrived at the notion of intercorporeality as a result of his twofold project: the explication of the concept of nature understood as ‘a leaf of Being’ and the revaluation of human existence as a particular form of chiasm. He declares: ‘By the nature in us, we can know Nature, and reciprocally it is from ourselves that living beings and even space speak to us.’ (2003: 206) Before explicitly referring to intercorporeity, however, he used such expressions as ‘interbeing’ and ‘intermundane world’. In the last part of his study of Nature, Merleau-Ponty underlines the focal role of the human body. Here, significantly, the human being is understood as the ‘*Ineinander* with animality and Nature’. (2003: 208) The notion of ‘*Ineinander*’, first introduced by Husserl in *Ideen II*, became pivotal to Merleau-Ponty in the course of these lectures. In relation to a human being Merleau-Ponty defined it as ‘the inherence of the self in the world and of the world in the self, of the self in the other and the other in the self.’ In *The Visible and the Invisible* he alternates the use of this Husserlian concept with the French word ‘*l’interlace*’ meaning intertwining.

It might be useful to recall that the first dictionary definition of ‘corporeality’ made a significant reference to a quality or state that has the nature of the animal body. This sense of corporeality is coherent with Merleau-Ponty’s first analysis contained in his lectures devoted to the notion of Nature. To Merleau-Ponty the animal body certainly appears as a significant entry point to an understanding of our own embodiment—of our engagement with the sensible world. I cannot dwell too long on his analysis of animal life, which is the subject of his study presented in the course of his 1957–58 lectures. Suffice to say that the fundamental characterisation of animal life is also expressed in terms of ‘*Ineinander*’, but at a different level and by different factors. It is ‘*Ineinander*’ of *umwelt* and of physiology. But ‘*Ineinander*’

to a more encompassing domain, or simply to Being. I must stress that this analysis has no linguistic authority. It effectively only reconstructs *post factum* the sense revealed by the Merleau-Pontian ‘intercorporeity’ when read in tandem with the notion of flesh as “‘element”, in the sense it was used to speak of water, air, earth and fire, that is, in the sense of a *general thing*, midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea, a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being’. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968). At the same time, I am tempted to see in this visual/semantic palimpsest, a possible affinity with the Derridean notion of ‘*différance*’. This term was also created—or, as Derrida maintained, was a creative force behind language in general—in this case by interposing the spatial and temporal sense of ‘to differ’ and ‘to defer’ respectively, as well as their active senses, in a noun form. On the other hand, I would claim, the notions of ‘dehiscence’ and ‘intertwining’, as structural components of Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of flesh, carry an even deeper affinity with the very sense of Derridean ‘*différance*’.

always indicates a fold; a surplus created with the very base materials of a given life form. This is also the case with the human being. Merleau-Ponty rejects the notion that the specificity of the human being, as contrasted with animality, is founded entirely upon consciousness or reason. He writes, ‘Reciprocally, human being is not animality (in the sense of mechanism) + reason.’ And this is why, he says, ‘we are concerned with the body: before being reason, humanity is another corporeity.’ (2003: 208) This is a layer upon which intercorporeality dwells. At this stage Merleau-Ponty does not yet call it intercorporeality, but the following paragraph brings together the concepts of the ‘manner of being as body’ and of an ‘*interbeing*’ thus supporting my assertion. He declares: ‘The concern is to grasp humanity first as another manner of being a body – to see humanity emerge just like being in the manner of a watermark, not as another substance, but as *interbeing*, and not as an imposition of a for-itself on a body in-itself.’ (2003: 208) The concept of *interbeing* underlies a specific, ontological status of the human body, emerging at the intersection of Nature and Culture, although it should be stated that Merleau-Ponty preferred to use the notion of *Logos*, rather than Culture.²⁹

The investigation of the human body as another corporeity—as *interbeing*—brought Merleau-Ponty to revisit the notion of the ‘corporeal schema’, first introduced in *Phenomenology of Perception*.³⁰ In *Nature*, he states:

The body is not only a thing, but also a relation to an *Umwelt*: this is already true of the animal body. [...] But this we know by the perception of the animal body which is ours: we are not animal, and our body is not this perception that we have of it. The [sea] urchin is not its *Bauplan*—“it is moved” (Uexküll), whereas the dog, and above all the human, moves. The

²⁹ To briefly mark a possible line of cross-investigation: I think that the description of the human body ‘not as another substance’ but as *interbeing*, and consequently ‘not as an imposition of a for-itself on a body in-itself’, regardless of the terminological disparity, would make it concordant with the contemporary critical theory of thinkers such as Donna Harway, Judith Butler and Elizabeth Grosz, who see performativity as a dominant attribute of the human body. There is more on the status of the body in contemporary feminist discourse in Chapter 1 of this thesis, entitled ‘Somatic turn’.

³⁰ The concept of the corporeal schema was first introduced by the English neurologist Henry Head, who, together with British neurologist Gordon Morgan Holmes, conducted pioneering work into the somatosensory system and sensory nerves. He first described the concept in 1911 in his work ‘Sensory disturbances from cerebral lesions’ (1911). Paul Schilder, an Austrian psychiatrist, psychoanalyst and neurologist, elaborated on this in his work ‘Das Körperschema’ (1923). Merleau-Ponty was familiar with both works. He employed this notion in his theory of the human body in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945). Note that the English translation erroneously and confusingly translates *le schéma corporel* as ‘body image’.

human body is thus a body that moves, and this also means a body that perceives. This is one of the meanings of the human “corporeal schema”.³¹
(2003: 209)

However, at this stage, the corporeal schema is already rephrased in a language resonant with the flesh ontology, employing the notion of reversibility. In the next passage Merleau-Ponty states:

To take up this notion again, to make the body appear as a subject of movement and a subject of perception – if that is not verbal, it means: the body as touching-touched, seeing-seen, the place of a kind of reflection and, thereby, the capacity to relate to something other than its own mass, to close the circuit on the visible, on a sensible exterior. (*Ibid.*)

Contrasting his present stance, which he calls ‘*Theory of the flesh*’ (italic in original), with the earlier, egological, view of *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty underlines the competence of the body in recovering the relationship with the world of things and other bodies, of somatically ‘becoming aware’ of it by saying:

It is not a surveying of the body and of the world by a consciousness, but rather is my body as interposed between what is in front of me and what is behind me, my body standing in front of the upright things, in a circuit with the world, an *Einführung* with the world, with the things, with the animals, with other bodies (as having a perceptual “side” as well) made comprehensible by this theory of the flesh.³² (*Ibid.*)

³¹ The above statement is very important in the context of Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of the human body as well as for his efforts to elucidate a prethetic mode of relating to the world—the seat of which is already in the body. However, Butoh dance is in equal measure interested in exploring the passive aspect of the human being in the world. It attends to the passive relation between the human body, its skeletal and muscular systems, and the world; in particular, Earth’s gravity, but also the Sun’s light, etc.

³² *Einführung* is usually translated as empathy, but here it should be understood in its most general sense, encompassing a sensorial ‘in-feeling’ [*ein – führung*] rather than exclusive empathy with the feelings of other human beings or animals. On the other hand, this semantic expansion is quite significant in the context of the ethical dimension of Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of flesh. This view is coherent with the interpretations of Rosalin Diprose (2002), Michael Levin (2008; 1985) Alphonso Lingis (1998) and David Abram (1996) to mention just a few.

The notion of ‘corporeal schema’, was preceded by Merleau-Ponty’s earlier research into the life of the infant, carried out during his tenure at the Sorbonne. The subject was genetic phenomenology of intersubjectivity, and the results were presented under the title *The Child’s Relations with Others* (1951). Interpreters of Merleau-Ponty’s later thinking such as M.C Dillon (1998) and David M. Levin (2008; 1985) underline the importance of his investigation into the child’s development for an elaboration of the notion of intercorporeality. In contrast to traditional accounts that presuppose that conscious life begins in a sphere of ownness, characterised by a nascent solipsism or self-centeredness, Merleau-Ponty describes an infant’s conscious life in terms of syncretism, defined by an indistinction of perspectives. This approach recasts the problem of ‘how does the infant begin to recognise others as other consciousnesses?’ as one that seeks the pivotal moment of differentiation from others. The first stage of the infant’s life is characterised by syncretic sociability. It manifests itself in the concrete phenomenon known as ‘contagion of cries’, which occurs in babies in the first months of life. (1964: 124) This seems to suggest that infants have not yet learned to distinguish the discomfort experienced by others, from their own somatic states. Hence, as Dillon comments, ‘they react to the existence of pain in their syncretic world regardless of the fact that they may be somatically comfortable.’ (1998: 121) Merleau-Ponty concludes that the first stage of life is characterised by ‘pre-communication, in which there is not one individual over against another but rather an anonymous collectivity, an undifferentiated group life’ (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 119). The process of the immediate assimilation of another’s experience into the sphere of one’s own is called ‘transitivism’. (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 135).

Merleau-Ponty also points to the astonishing capacity for mimesis that infants display from a very early age, as conditioned by the operation of the corporeal schema. But how, in the final instance, can we understand the corporeal schema? According to Dillon the notion of corporal schema,

allows one to conceive the infant as experiencing his body by *living it*. His body is neither purely subject (in which case it would be invisible to him) nor purely object (in which case it would not serve his primitive intensions); it is rather the ground of a style of interacting with the environment. The

corporeal schema must be understood adverbially, as a manner of being and doing by means of which the infant can see what he does. (1998,:122)

It is significant that Dillon stresses the adverbial modus of corporeal schema; it being a style or a manner of being rather than the physiological mechanism. In this way it is located in a domain that cannot be described by the purely objective methods of empirical science, nor in the sphere of immanence. It is, instead, a primordial expressivity that situates the infant in the in-between sphere, where the flesh of his body—unreflectively drawing from the resources of the primordial flesh—creates a perceptual link with the surrounding world. This, in the words of Dillon, is ‘the primordial experience of corporeal reflexivity, the aboriginal experience of body-in-relation-to-world-and-itself.’ (*Ibid.*)

Ultimately it is the transfer of corporeal schema, understood as primordial corporeal reflexivity—a visible style of relating to the world expanding boundaries of the infants’ flesh—that makes possible the phenomena of mimesis, transitivity and syncretic sociability. Having advanced the relational link between the transfer of corporeal schema, which founds transitivity, which in turn is the foundation of syncretic sociability or ‘pathetic identification’, Merleau-Ponty established the ground for ‘proto-intersubjectivity’ or ‘intercorporeality’. Dillon maintains that, despite a later objectification, or externalisation, of the corporeal schema, which is necessary for establishing the personal identity of the child, syncretic sociability is never erased. He says: ‘the sense of human community, based on the enduring phenomenon of transfer of corporeal schema, will remain as a permanent experiential possibility.’ (1998: 124)

That is why the notion of intercorporeality—which has its own domain of influence, distinct to but complementing intersubjectivity—can be productively evoked in Merleau-Ponty’s later project of unearthing the domain of the elemental flesh. Intercorporeality is ‘an experiential possibility’; a resource originating in the somatic reflexivity of our body-mind, that can potentially reconnect us with the ‘wild being’; with the flesh of the world. But intercorporeality is ultimately an expression of our embodied existence *par excellence* that can contribute to the transformation of

the ethical modes that shape our interpersonal, but also our interspeciesistic, relationships.³³ Levin articulates this argument clearly:

The task that the resumption of Merleau-Ponty's project would seem to suggest - or that, in any case, one might profitably undertake - calls for reflecting on the transformative potential inherent in the phenomenological restitution ("récupération" and "reprise" are his words) of the marvellous experience of prepersonal intercorporeality that appropriates the life of the infant. If the adult, instead of maintaining a speech the character of which is determined by an ego-logical subjectivity - consequently by an objectifying, instrumental rationality - were to "open up" the voice, perhaps it could become a communicative medium for the bodily felt sense that might emerge from the effort to retrieve something of the infant's "paradisical" experience, long suppressed, split off, virtually forgotten, of intercorporeality. What new world we might live in, if the adult, instead of perpetuating a speech, a way with words that has been complicitous in an ontology and politics of violence, were to attempt to make contact with this prepersonal sense of interpersonal connectedness - with what, in 'The Intertwining - The Chiasm' - Merleau-Ponty will call a "universal flesh"? (2008: 191)

I will refrain from an analysis of the rather strong claim made by Levin regarding the connection between ego-logical subjectivity, language, instrumental rationality and the politics of violence. These claims, presented against a claim concerning the 'marvellous experience of prepersonal intercorporeality', exceed the scope of my investigation.

I would stress, however, that his methodological claim advising reflection upon the 'transformative potential inherent in the phenomenological restitution', might brings us to the verge of prepersonal intercorporeality. The instances of this embodied 'phenomenological restitution' will be presented in the final chapter of this

³³ This is a term that I borrowed from the paper of Hwa Yol Jung, entitled 'Merleau-Ponty's Transversal Geophilosophy and Sinic Aesthetics of Nature', published in *Merleau-Ponty and Environmental Philosophy: Dwelling on the Landscape of Thought*, ed. Suzanne L. Cataldi and William S. Hamrick, 235-257 (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007).

thesis and it is by inhabiting the somatic mode of attention that, I hope, we will be able to gain an insight into the intercorporeal domain.

It has already been stated that the notion of intercorporeality is not a self-standing concept, but an integral part of a network, where the notions of reversibility, chiasm, dehiscence, and flesh all refer to each other, or reflect on each other, in a process not unlike the play of mirrors.³⁴ Therefore, it would be fitting to indicate the way that each of the structural elements of the flesh ontology chiasmatically support intercorporeality.

In his book *The Body's Recollection of Being* David Levin uses the word intercorporeality as almost synonymous with the notion of Flesh. Both notions are defined by 'intertwining' and 'reversibility'. (1985: 67) Indeed, many passages in 'The Intertwining – The Chiasm' give the impression that in the process of describing the flesh of my body I have already entered the field of intra-corporeal exchange. The famous passage about the double sensation of the touching hands testifies to that. But this micro-corporeal scale is quickly transgressed and our awareness is launched via a sensorial synaesthesia into the domain of external flesh. And then, once again, we seem to encroach upon the local body, if only we allow ourselves to in all sincerity inhabit the act of handshake with the fellow human: 'Now why would this generality, which constitutes the unity of my body, not open it to other bodies? The handshake too is reversible; I can feel myself touched as well at the same as touching'. (1968: 140) Merleau-Ponty writes about the domain of intercorporeality as an unlimited one and ties the possibility of its conception to an emergence within the flesh. He describes both in terms of a relation that traverses; that 'animates other bodies as well as my own.' (1968: 140)

Remy Kwant, in his book *From Phenomenology to Metaphysics* (1966) reinforces this point by stating that 'What happens in me can pass over onto the

³⁴ This self-referential aspect of his ontological discourse could become the subject of a separate, in-depth study. Merleau-Ponty uses the mirror metaphor on many occasions, but, significantly, to him the mirror, as a corporeal being and its ability to 'introject-project' something of the external world, portrays something very concrete. In *Eye and Mind* he writes 'Every technique is a "technique of the body"', illustrating and amplifying the metaphysical structure of our flesh. The mirror emerges because I am a visible see-er, because there is reflexivity of the sensible; the mirror translates and reproduces that reflexivity.' And he adds 'Artists have often mused upon mirrors because beneath this "mechanical trick," they recognise, as in the case of the "trick" of perspective, the metamorphosis of seeing and seen that defines both our flesh and the painter's vocation' in Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Merleau-Ponty Reader* (Evanstone: Northwestern University Press, 1968) p. 359. He also traces the metaphysical status of mirror-like reflexivity in relation to the elemental Flesh in 'The Intertwining – The Chiasm' and *The Child's Relation to Others* is an in-depth analysis of the Lacanian theory of the specular image as constitutive for a child's individuation via the establishment of body image.

other. Our being is contagious. ... Our existence is not immanent but transitive. ... We communicate, since we are all “perceiving perceptibles,” since the same “flesh of the world” makes us see, makes us perceive.’³⁵ And, he adds, ‘Because the same relationship of the visible to itself is realized in many bodies, an “intercorporeality” arises. I can touch my touching hand. I am then contacting a corporeal being which contacts things. In the same way I can touch the touching hand of another person. Then also I am contacting a corporal being which contacts things.’ Intercorporeality emerges as a result of the reversibility, which characterises Flesh as ‘the ultimate truth’. (1968: 155)

Gail Weiss, in ‘Écart’—a chapter of her book *Body Images: Embodiment as Intercorporeality* (1999)—also writes about Merleau-Ponty’s notion of reversibility as constitutive for an emergence of intercorporeality. First, she underscores its ‘extreme’ spatiality. Then—in accordance with Merleau-Ponty’s own definition of flesh as an ontological medium, as *arche* in the ancient sense of the term—she describes reversibility ‘as a metaphysical principle that functions on both a micro-level and a macro-level to characterize the body’s interactions with itself, with others and with the world.’ (1999: 119) She later specifies that

on a micro-level, reversibility breaks down the conceptual boundaries between what have traditionally been understood as discrete bodily sensations, performing what Judith Butler has called a kind of “transubstantiation” of vision into touch, movement into expression, whereby I see by “touching” and move by “speaking” with my body.³⁶ (*Ibid.*)

³⁵ Remy C. Kwant, *From Phenomenology to Metaphysics* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1966), pp. 68–70 after Sue L. Cataldi, *Emotion, Depth, And Flesh. A Study of Sensitive Space: Reflections on Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Embodiment* (Albany: State University of New York, 1993).

³⁶ Here I would like to mention an interesting parallel,—worthy of further exploration—between a way of describing this interaction or intertwining of the senses that we observe in a later text of Judith Butler devoted to Merleau-Ponty, with a principle of Butoh dance, namely transformation. I think that this parallel could be explained as two ways of describing the same phenomenon, first seen from the epistemological/metaphysical perspective and, then, from the experiential practice of Butoh dance. It regards the point when the synchrony of senses that attest to the kinship between apparently different orders of perception is translated or manifests itself in the event of the transformation of the dancer. Judith Butler, ‘Merleau-Ponty and the Touch of Melbranche,’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Taylor Carman and Mark, B.N. Hansen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

Weiss summarises: ‘on a macro-level, reversibility describes an ongoing interaction between the flesh of the body, the flesh of others, and the flesh of the world, a process in which corporeal boundaries are simultaneously erected and dismantled.’ (*Ibid.*) Reversibility is therefore seen by Weiss as an operative principle that enlivens intercorporeality as an interaction between different manifestations of flesh.

Chapter II

Phenomenologies of embodiment – selected perspectives

The physical body is continuous with the universe, but to enter it you start not with microscopes. You start with quite ordinary experience; you start in just the same place where you are hungry or scared.

Eugene T. Gendlin, *The Wider Role of Bodily Sense in Thought and Language* (1992: 194)

The purpose of this chapter is to review contemporary phenomenological perspectives that arise from critical and creative engagement with Merleau-Ponty's ontology of flesh. An outline of this expansive field will allow us to situate the main theme of the thesis, namely the notion of 'intercorporeality', as proposed by Merleau-Ponty in his unfinished book *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968).

2.1 Embodiment and somatic modes of attention in cultural phenomenology

We find many implicit understandings of the notion of embodiment and consequently rather an intuitive use of it. Much less frequently do we come across an explicit definition of this term. Allow me therefore to first present a definition, which at this stage will give us a tentative understanding of this phenomenon. For this purpose I have chosen a definition proposed by Thomas J. Csordas, an American ethnologist who employs a phenomenological approach in his exploration of the phenomenon of embodiment. He is the editor of *Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self*. In the article 'Embodiment and Cultural Phenomenology' Csordas defines embodiment as 'an existential condition in which the body is the subjective source or intersubjective ground of experience.' (Csordas 1999: 143) I believe that the above formulation, despite its conciseness, offers an insight into the nature of this phenomenon. It is adequately precise while, at the same time, keeping open many possible variations of meaning that might be reflected by different disciplinary approaches. In its structure it contains almost every notion that is essential in order to enable a methodical analysis of the conceptual components of embodiment in the existing literature. Accordingly, we are presented with the following notions: 'existence'; the body as a 'subjective source'; and the

‘intersubjective ground of experience’. All these terms—either in the form presented above or as derivatives—will serve as possible angles from which to shed light on the notions of embodiment and, subsequently, intercorporeality.

Csordas’s approach to embodiment also marks a series of important methodological questions about investigations within the field. Immediately upon defining embodiment in terms of an existential condition—in which it is the body that is a subjective source, or intersubjective ground of experience—he concludes that, consequently all the studies ‘under the rubric of embodiment are not ‘about’ the body per se.’ (1999: 143) He clarifies that the studies established a field focussing on ‘culture and experience insofar as these can be understood from the standpoint of bodily being-in-the-world.’ (*Ibid.*) What they need, he postulates, is a ‘cultural phenomenology’—a higher-level reflection; a meta-discipline that would be concerned ‘with synthesizing the immediacy of embodied experience with the multiplicity of cultural meaning in which we are always and inevitably immersed’ (1999: 143). Csordas holds that the notion of the body is a highly unstable one due to its culturally variable interrelation with the mental and spiritual components that together form the subject. As a result, traditional critical theory was faced with two possible ways of understanding the body: the culture nexus, and the nature nexus. In the first—historically earlier—perspective, the body is defined within the framework of biological essentialism wherein it is entirely or at least predominantly determined by the laws of nature. On the other hand, social constructivism perceives the body exclusively—or at least primarily—as a cultural and historical phenomenon. This latter view advances the body as a mind in the past; a *tabula rasa* upon which culture inscribes its meanings. However, this formulation seems somewhat problematic, and Csordas suggests that a disjunctive and foundational mode of thinking is hardly sustainable, because the body should be regarded as ‘always already cultural as well as biological’ (1999: 144).³⁷ Consequently, a third possibility poses the problem in a different way. It inverts the previous two formulations by suggesting that perhaps

³⁷ This recognition, however, is not a recent one, as Toril Moi reminds us in her book *What is a Woman?* (1999). Questions about the body, culture and nature nexus were being posed already in the late 1940’s, with the publication of Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) and Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949). Both suggested that the body is not a thing and as such cannot be submitted to the reductionist methodology of scientism and positivism. While developing her concept of the body as situation, De Beauvoir writes: ‘As Merleau-Ponty very justly puts it, man is not a natural species; he is a historical idea. [...] As viewed in the perspective that I am adopting – that of Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty – [...] the body is not a thing, it is a situation: it is our grasp on the world and a sketch of our projects (De Beauvoir 1945: 73 after Moi 1999: 62).

‘culture and history are bodily phenomena as well as the product of ideas, symbols and material conditions.’ (1999: 144) This approach takes its point of departure from the body itself and bestows upon it a constitutive meaning in relation to the earlier determining conditions. Yet, as Csordas says, a methodological distinction between the body and embodiment is necessary for a productive examination of this possibility. Examination in terms of embodiment asks about the manner in which ‘the body is an existential condition of life.’ This reveals the modes of many possible styles of embodiment and methods of objectification that are critical to the understanding of culture. Hence, the second possibility critically distinguishes between them while maintaining their mutual interdependence: ‘the body as a biological, material entity and embodiment as an indeterminate methodological field defined by perceptual experience and mode of presence and engagement in the world.’ (1999: 145) Furthermore, Csordas makes a crucial point in the context of current critical theory, operating within the parallel field of textuality. Recalling Barthes’s distinction between the work as a material object and the text as a result of interpretation or discourse—later renamed in terms of a distinction between text and textuality—he juxtaposes it with the aforementioned distinction between the body and embodiment. (1986: 57–68) He goes on to underline the awareness of those distinct, although co-existing and intertwined, orders. He reminds us that the radical epistemological move that ultimately privileges discourse and representation ruled out the notion of ‘experience’ altogether from critical theory. This linguistic turn, despite its usefulness for a deep critique of specific representations, creates a dangerous methodological monism. It does this in two respects. Regarding our field of investigation, it renders a dimension of bodily experience inaccessible. As Csordas puts it, it ‘makes difficult the posing of questions about the limits of representation, or whether there is anything beyond or outside of representations.’ (1999: 146) The consequences for our exploration of the body and intercorporeality are significant. Adjusting our purpose to Csordas’s example makes a difference, whether one is dealing with the cultural meaning of the white-painted, naked body of the Butoh dancer or the bodily experience of wearing particles of soil on one’s own, almost naked body.³⁸

³⁸ And yet both of these aspects belong intrinsically to the phenomenon of Butoh dance, construing a specific dimension of intercorporeal interaction between the dancers and the spectator. On the one hand Butoh may lend itself to postcolonial questioning, born within the spectator’s perspective, of the

Consequently, Csordas postulates that there must be an alternative that can take these differences into account and allow them to work productively alongside one another. He finds that, in the phenomenological tradition, this is expressed by Heidegger's claim that language is capable of disclosing experience. This was also implicit in the entire Husserlian project. At this point Csordas indicates the notion of being-in-the-world as taking place alongside representation. In order to be faithful to Csordas's view, it must be stated that he underlines the word 'alongside' in his effort to pose these modes of description as complementary rather than as mutually exclusive. This crucial emphasis also brings a methodological awareness to my own exploration of the phenomena of embodiment: the body and intercorporeality.

However, what is particularly important to my endeavour here is the term 'being-in-the-world'—as propounded in Heidegger's *Being and Time*—as this defines the perspective of studying in terms of embodiment. Significantly, it also strikes a chord with the phenomenological approach of Merleau-Ponty, where the body is both subject and object and where our embodiment is, consequently, a portal through which the world is given to us.

Csordas defines the concept of somatic modes of attention (1993; 1994) as 'culturally elaborated ways of attending to and with one's own body in surroundings that include the embodied presence of others.' (1999: 151) An example of an approach from the standpoint of embodiment is, according to Csordas 'the engagement of sensory modalities in these phenomena, an engagement that defines a mode of intersubjective perception and attention to the distress of another.' (1999: 152) The concept then provides a distinct methodological tool, which is not only directed towards the investigation of embodiment but which also has its source in the body. It contributes in bringing together theoretical investigations and practical modes of study that concentrate on different aspects of embodiment. As such it resonates with phenomenologies of dance presented later in this chapter, as well as with phenomenologies of the sensuous as advanced by David Abram and Alphonso Lingis.

significance of the whiteness as an emblem of distinctiveness, and as a means of conveying the significance of the dancing body. On the other hand it might open the dimension of a regionally specific narrative about the intertwinement of life and death, symbolised by the white colour of the rice powder, referring simultaneously to death and the fertility of the soil. In yet another instance, it can induce in the dancer the embodiment of these diverse experiences.

2.2 Ontology and embodiment

I would now like to turn towards the understanding of ontology and its relevance for the ontological status of the aforementioned investigations. The recognition of the importance of ontology, besides being in clear accord with the Merleau-Pontian understanding of philosophy, as found in his later works, is also expressed in David M. Levin's *The Body's Recollection of Being: Phenomenological Psychology and the Destruction of Nihilism* (1985); an inspired commentary on the works of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty concerning the body, Being and ontology. Significantly, in his introduction Levin refers to and develops Heidegger's understanding of ontology that has been at the heart of Merleau-Ponty's ontological project. Allow me to quote at length from Levin's introduction and comment on Heidegger's elaboration of ontology:

It is an understandable ontical misunderstanding of the ontological difference between beings and Being to believe that we are necessarily *turned away from* the open dimension of Being insofar as we are *attentive* to finite things in the everyday world. This misunderstanding stems from the fact that Being is still being thought dualistically – as if it were an object, one being among other beings. I want to suggest that consummation of the 'ontological attitude' consists precisely in our capacity to maintain an open guardian awareness of the ontological (i.e., of Being as a whole) *while being engaged with beings in our everyday life*. Being is not being of another kind. *That* difference is not the *ontological* difference. Being is rather (we might say) a dimension, a field, a clearing-for: different in *this* way (1985: 22)

Against the background of Heidegger's notorious 'ontological difference', Levin states that ontology, or an 'ontological attitude', can be at work 'while being engaged with being in our everyday life' and can as such attend to the most elementary dimension of it. This introduction is followed by a crucial quote from Heidegger's *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*:

Being is given only if the understanding of being, hence the *Dasein*, exists. This being accordingly lays claim to a distinctive priority in ontological inquiry...Ontology [i.e., the philosophical meditation on Being] has for its fundamental discipline the analytic of Dasein. This implies at the same time that ontology cannot be established in a purely ontological manner. Its possibility is [necessarily to be] referred back to a being, that is, something ontical – the Dasein. Ontology has an ontical foundation, a fact which is manifestation over and over again in the history of philosophy down to the present. (1982: 19)

Heidegger states that ‘ontology has an ontical foundation’, that is, that it has its foundations within the very structure of human Being, or *Dasein*—the term used by Heidegger to refer to the manner in which human individuals exist. This insistence on the ontical foundations, to be found in the concrete life of Dasein, suggests a necessary recognition of the somatic sphere of its existence. Levin’s comment points, on this occasion, to the process orientated, or ‘performative’, character of ontology:

Ontology does not happen by itself. Ontology is a work of thought, and therefore it must be referred back to (or correlated with) the being who is thinking. As an undertaking of human beings, ontology manifests the character of the human being who is always already in relatedness-to-Being. But ontology is not only the *articulation* of that relationship; it is itself a dimension, or moment, within the very relatedness it is in process of disclosing and bringing forth (1985: 22–23)

Such an account of ontology is crucial in the context of any project that explores the region of somatic and pre-reflective grounds of cognitive consciousness. To further support my emphasis on the importance of ontological perspectives already resonating between Eastern and Western traditions, as represented by Heidegger and Levin, I will briefly review the ideas of the leading feminist theorist Elizabeth Grosz. In the chapter ‘The Question of Ontology’—found in her book *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power* (2005)—Grosz reveals the conflict in which the ontological is entangled within the context of contemporary critical theory. She states:

The ontological has been reduced, bit by bit, to the epistemological, to the representational, and to the reflective, but it remains an abiding, indeed an intractable commitment that politics, ethics, aesthetics – the realm of the intersubjective and the collective more generally – must make in spite of themselves (2005: 127–128)

The role of ontology, in my view, has a more general bearing on an exploration of the leading themes of feminist theory, and is of particular importance to my project when viewed by Grosz in the following terms:

The crucial questions of subjectivity and intersubjectivity to which feminist theory has addressed itself have an unacknowledged underside: the subjective, the intersubjective, the human, must be positioned in a context in which the subhuman, the extrahuman, and the nonhuman play a formative [...] role. (2005: 128)

Grosz does, however, qualify her proposition by saying that this dimension of the ontological should not be attributed to the ‘determining role’. Nevertheless, the ontological is an element in which ‘the human in its diverse forms and corporealities emerges from and functions within natural, technological, and social orders’ and in which ‘it [the human] finds itself placed as event and advent rather than agent.’ (2005: 128) These last words especially present the human ‘as event and advent rather than agent’ and resonate powerfully with the ontological stand of the late thought of Merleau-Ponty and the embodied practice of Butoh dance.

The short discussion above regarding ontology and its place in the debate about embodiment as viewed from the perspectives of Heidegger, Levin, and Grosz certainly cannot give a comprehensive account of the field. It is intended mainly as a demonstration of how ontology has a bearing on the investigation of embodiment. On the other hand—and especially when taking the Japanese approach, with its insistence on the transformative power of somatic practice—I want to state a case for the possibility of using the artistic practice of Butoh dance as a field of embodied ontological investigation.

2.3 Phenomenology of the Sensuous

Merleau-Ponty's entire body of work—beginning with *The Structure of Behavior* (1942) through his 1958–1960 lecture course *Nature* and ending with his *Working Notes* and other passages spread across *The Visible and the Invisible*—is permeated with references to the natural world. His last series of lectures was devoted to different aspects in which the notion of Nature has been portrayed in Western philosophy, starting with Descartes, through Spinoza and Schelling and ending with the 20th century philosophers Bergson and Whitehead. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological investigations into the relationship between human being and Nature became an inspiration for the contemporary phenomenologist David Abram. David Abram's eco-phenomenological exploration of perception and our embeddedness in the natural world—as expressed in his *The Spell of the Sensuous* (1996)—opens another perspective through which a phenomenon of intercorporeality can be appreciated. Just as for me it is the practice of Japanese Butoh dance, to Abram it was the experience of living in Nepal and rural Indonesia that focused his research on the subtle dependence of human cognition upon our natural environment. Opening up to the worldview of these different cultural perspectives made it possible for him to nurture sensitivity to extrahuman reality; to a dimension of the ongoing reciprocity within the sensuous world and, in that way, to reveal to us instances of intercorporeal experience.

On a theoretical plane, David Abram—like Merleau-Ponty and subsequent generations of phenomenologists—begins his approach in dialogue with the philosophy of Edmund Husserl. Abram does not, admittedly, dwell on detailed analyses of *aporias* in Husserl's vast body of knowledge. As is sufficient for his project, he offers a succinct overview of Husserlian thought, focussing on bringing into relief key notions that enables phenomenology to bring the natural, or other-than-human, world into its interest-sphere. Abram credits Husserl with introducing the notion of intersubjectivity into philosophical discourse. This was a gesture designed to counteract the solipsism that haunted the early phenomenologists. Husserl concluded that intersubjectivity emerges as a result of the resonance between bodily subjects that come into being via the apperception of one's own, and the perception of other's gestures and movements. This notion also counteracted an objectivist view of the sciences, which in Husserl's opinion were in danger of losing

touch with their roots: the domain of lived experience. Husserl called this sphere the life-world; the *Lebenswelt*. Abram suggests that Husserl's notion of life-world, despite its various cultural and even species-specific manifestations, opens the possibility for appreciation of an often overlooked, underlying, primordial and more unitary dimension: the earth itself. According to Husserl, to our most immediate sensorial experience, 'bodies are given as having the sense of being earthly bodies, and space is given as having the sense of being earth-space'³⁹

2.3.1 Earthly Topology of Time

Abram takes up this idea, and with further input from Merleau-Ponty's later writings, and Martin Heidegger, develops it into the 'Earthy Topology of Time.' Abram reinterprets Heidegger's metaphorical use of the term 'horizon' in reference to the ecstatic nature of time, and notices a correspondence between the conceptual structure of time as described by Heidegger, and the perceptual structure of the enveloping landscape. He conceives of the visible horizon as a kind of gateway or threshold, 'joining the presence of the surrounding terrain to that which exceeds this open presence, to that which is hidden *beyond* the horizon. The horizon carries the promise of something more, something *other*.' (1996: 210) He describes how in our everyday experience our most immediate future seems not so much some mysterious realm as an aspect of the environment that lies beyond the horizon. During a walk across open countryside, the bodily experience of the future will be fulfilled when we reach a new topographical feature. An example may be a forest that withholds its landscape, densely inhabited by flora and fauna different to that which we encounter along the country road. In the urban landscape the future configuration of people and objects may be obstructed by the large building, it may be just around the corner, or at the end of the long journey with the underground train, after which we emerge in another distant part of the city. In that instant our body will adjust its organic responses to a new living present that surrounds it or, in Abram words, 'our sensing bodies respond to the eloquence of certain buildings and boulders.' (1996: 86)

³⁹ Edmund Husserl, 'Foundational Investigations of the Phenomenological Origin of the Spatiality of Nature' trans. Fred Kersten, in Peter McCormick and Frederic A. Elliston, eds., *Husserl: Shorter Works* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1981) after David Abram (1996: 42).

The past also has a sensuous structure of presence, although it would be more correct to say that it has a structure of absence. The archetypical mode of absence corresponding to the sensuous experience of the past—or the invisible aspect of the visible environment, to use Merleau-Ponty's terminology in *The Visible and the Invisible*—are deposited, suggests Abram, *under the ground*. He clarifies:

While the open horizon withholds the visibility of that which lies beyond it, the ground is much more resolute in concealment of what lies beneath it. It is this resoluteness, this *refusal* of access to what lies beneath the ground, that enables the ground to solidly support all those phenomena that move or dwell upon its surface. (1996: 213)

He elaborates further on the corporeal roots of our time perception:

the conceptual abstraction that we commonly term 'the future' would seem to be born from our bodily awareness of that which exceeds, and thus holds open, the living present. What we commonly term 'the past' would seem to be rooted in our carnal sense of that which is under the ground - of that which resists, and thus supports, the living present. As ground and horizon, these dimensions are no more temporal than they are spatial, no more mental than they are bodily and sensorial. (1996: 214–215)

Abram reminds us that the genesis of so-called objective time has its roots in the particular relationship between our body and the surrounding environment. There is a system of equivalences of temporalities that different levels of sensorial awareness are able to retrieve and follow the rhythm of. And it is in that corporeal continuum, which spreads from the past of the carbonised trees through the delicate tissue of the single blade of grass, up to our own body cells, pulsating with life right in this moment, that the spatio-temporal web of sensuous being subsists. I believe my interpretation is also warranted by this statement from Merleau-Ponty's *Notes*: 'this logic is neither *produced* by our psychophysical constitution, nor produced by our

categorial equipment, but lifted from a *world* whose inner framework our categories, our constitution, our “subjectivity” render explicit.’⁴⁰

David Abram insists that the logic of temporal equivalences is in a very concrete way accessible in our embodied selves in that they are not divided from the sensuous world and they inhabit every instant of the temporal landscape with the same sense of wonder. He states:

The sensorial landscape, in other words, not only opens onto that distant future waiting beyond the horizon but also onto a near future, onto an immanent field of possibilities waiting behind each tree, behind each stone, behind each leaf from whence a spider may at any moment come crawling into our awareness. And this living terrain is supported not only by that more settled or sedimented past under the ground, but by an immanent past resting inside each tree, within each blade of grass, within the very muscles and cells of our own bodies. (1996: 215)

That same wonder, which derives from sensorial awareness, is also an essential characteristic of Butoh dance. It is particularly underlined in the training of my Butoh dance teacher Atsushi Takenouchi, who often inspires his workshop participants to move with the quality corresponding to the life of the three-thousand-year-old sequoia tree or to a duration of the rock on the one hand, and to embrace the intensity of the movement that marks the particular life cycle of an insect on the other. In the case of Takenouchi’s style of Butoh, this temporal sensitivity finds its genesis in Shinto religion, native to Japan.⁴¹

2.3.2 The Animateness of the Sensual World

David Abram reevaluates a binary opposition between the active subject and the passive object in the context of our perceptual embeddedness within the natural world, labelling it ‘animateness’. He tries to rekindle our natural attitude and retrieve our immediate experience of phenomena as dynamic presences that confront us and

⁴⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), pp 247–48.

⁴¹ Key aspects of Shinto, and particular methods of Butoh training as employed by Atsushi Takenouchi will both be taken up in chapters three and four respectively.

draw us into relation. This reflection is of great significance for an understanding of the idea of intercorporeality within Merleau-Ponty's ontology of flesh, as well as for an awakening to this phenomenon within Butoh dance practice. It also bridges the gap between Western philosophy and the animistic dimension of perception and feeling of indigenous societies. This, to a large extent, also shapes the ancient Japanese worldview framed by the native religion Shinto.

The animateness of the sensuous world essentially refers to a perceptual reciprocity that obtains between our body and the bodies of other living beings and natural phenomena. Abram states:

[...] in the untamed world of direct sensory experience *no* phenomenon presents itself as utterly passive or inert. To the sensing body *all* phenomena are animate, actively soliciting the participation of our senses, or else withdrawing from our focus and repelling our involvement. Things disclose themselves to our immediate perception as vectors, as styles of unfolding – not as finished chunks of matter given once and for all, but as dynamic ways of engaging the senses and modulating the body. (1996: 81)

Already in *Phenomenology of Perception* does Merleau-Ponty offer an insight into a reciprocal relationship between us and sensible things that pivots on alternating the activity and the passivity of the 'subject' and the 'object'. He observes: 'I give ear, or look, in the expectation of a sensation, and suddenly the sensible takes possession of my ear or my gaze, and I surrender a part of my body, even my whole body, to this particular manner of vibrating and filling space...'⁴²

Abram contends that in the act of perception we enter into a sympathetic relation with the perceived, which is possible 'only because neither my body nor the sensible exists outside of the flux of time, and so each has its own dynamism, its own pulsation and style.' (1996: 54) There is an attunement or synchronisation between our own rhythms and those of the things themselves, as well as their tones, and textures. Abram quotes Merleau-Ponty to illustrate this dance between the carnal

⁴² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), pp 211–12. It will be in descriptions of my own Butoh training where the passivity of the so-called inanimate entity such as ground usually receding into the background of our perception is experienced as responsive in its particular way.

subject and its world, where the body and the things operate on some primordial plane and their roles oscillate:

...in so far as my hand knows hardness and softness, and my gaze knows the moons' light, it is a certain way of linking up with the phenomenon and communicating with it. Hardness and softness, roughness and smoothness, moonlight and sunlight, present themselves in our recollection not pre-eminently as sensory content but as certain kinds of symbioses, certain ways the outside has of invading us and certain ways we have of meeting this invasion.⁴³

The above passage—one of the many descriptions to be found in *Phenomenology of Perception*—asserts that perception, phenomenologically considered, is inherently participatory; that it involves at its most intimate level an active interplay, or coupling, between our sensing body and that which it perceives. To define another being as an inert or passive object is to deny its ability to actively engage us and to provoke our sense. In this way, pronounces Abram 'we block our perceptual reciprocity with that being.' (1996: 56)

If we are to unblock the perceptual reciprocity with the sensual, we have to reacquaint ourselves with our own bodies. Merleau-Ponty devoted a lot of attention to our sensing bodies; to how our senses engage with the world below and beyond our conscious awareness. Although vision is no less sensitive to the animateness of the living landscape than our other senses, owing to cultural bias, it came to almost exclusively define the nature of perception. Visual data and the interpretation of these became instrumental for perpetuating the subject-object bifurcation and, consequently, objectification of non-human entities at the detriment of our reciprocity with them. This is why Abram underscores that by perception we should understand 'concerted activity of *all* the body's senses as they function and flourish together.' (1996: 59) Here he takes recourse to the notion of synaesthesia: the overlap and blending of the senses. Going against the neuroscience of his time, which diagnosed synesthesia as pathological, Merleau-Ponty considered our

⁴³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), p. 317.

primordial, preconception experience as inherently synaesthetic. Merleau-Ponty comments in *Phenomenology of Perception*:

...Synaesthetic perception is the rule, and we are unaware of it only because scientific knowledge shifts the centre of gravity of experience, so that we have unlearned how to see, hear, and generally speaking, feel in order to deduce, from our bodily organization and the world as the *physicist* conceives it, what we are to see, hear, and feel. (1962: 229)

Abram hastens to clarify that the above statement does not deny that senses are distinct modalities, yet their functions within the framework of a single, unitary body is based on their interdependence and necessary overlap. It is owing to the engagement of the many senses connecting up with one another, that we achieve a sensation, and image, of the coherent thing. And conversely, claims Abram, it is thanks to things engaging and gathering our senses that we are able to experience the thing itself ‘as a centre of forces, as another nexus of experience, as an Other.’ (1996: 62) In our perception, therefore, there are two processes occurring simultaneously. On the one hand there is dynamic participation between our body and things. On the other hand, within the perception itself—on ‘our side’ as it were—there is participation between the various sensory systems of the body itself. Moreover, these two events are not separate for, as Abram claims in accordance with Merleau-Ponty thought, ‘the intertwining of my body with the things it perceives is effected only through the interweaving of my senses and vice versa’ (1996: 62) The divergence of our senses testifies that our body is destined to the world; that it is a sort of open circuit ‘that completes itself only in things, in others, in the encompassing earth.’ (1996: 62)

Recovery of the incarnate, sensorial dimension of experience brings also a retrieval of a living landscape in which we are corporeally embedded. Regained somatic awareness allows us to appreciate that our perception is part of vast, interpenetrating webwork of perceptions and sensations borne by countless other bodies. The functions of our embodied self, its very existence, is supported not just by ourselves but, as David Abram reminds us ‘by icy streams tumbling down granitic slopes, by owl wings and lichens, and by the unseen, imperturbable wind.’ (1966: 65) This supports the Husserlian notion of the life-world, now disclosed as a carnal

field. Abram here draws a clear link between the contemporary notion of ‘biospheric web’ and the specifically Merleau-Pontian notion of ‘the Flesh’; the pillar of his ontology:

The notion of earthly nature as a densely interconnected organic network – a ‘biospheric web’ wherein each entity draws its specific character from its relations, direct and indirect, to all others – has today become a commonplace, and it converges neatly with Merleau-Ponty’s late description of sensuous reality, ‘the Flesh’, as an intertwined and actively intertwining, lattice of mutually dependent phenomena, both sensorial and sentient, of which our own sensing bodies are a part. (1996: 85)

I have arrived at the end of my review of David Abram’s eco-phenomenology. I could not introduce all themes of his extensive study. But my aim was to present those elements that carry particular importance for my own project of thinking through Merleau-Ponty’s notion of intercorporeality in the context of Butoh dance practice. I have recovered the sense of the participatory relationship between our somatic selves and animate entities, which can be conceived as a biospheric web, and is close in framing to Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of flesh. I have also strengthened a notion of engaged bodily awareness as a prerequisite for gaining insight into the field of intercorporeality. The next section, devoted to the phenomenology of Alphonso Lingis, will reveal further inspirations that have informed my research.

2.4 Sensuous Imperative

The question of our relationship to other animate beings, as well as to inanimate objects, is where an ontology of flesh significantly diverts both from empirical and idealistic traditions of Western discourse. Lingis, just like David Abram, makes it one of the central aspects of his thought. To him, our existence is defined by responsivity. In his *The Imperative* Lingis articulates it in the following words: ‘sensibility, sensuality, and perception [are] not reactions to physical causality nor adjustments to physical pressures, not free and spontaneous impositions of order on amorphous data, but responses to directives.’ (1998: 3)

He here marks a critical stance towards deterministic causality as well against the constructivist view, undelining responsiveness as a dominant mode of our being-in-the world. In attributing it a special status within a ‘liminal’ space between ontology and ethics, he uses the notion of ‘directive’ to denote a force that animates our engagement with the world.

Lingis—following in the steps of Merleau-Ponty’s thought in *The Visible and the Invisible*—supplements the notion of the ‘subject-body’ with a language describing characteristics that are common to our body as well as to the bodies of other sentient beings. He speaks, therefore, of sensibility and sensuality. This style is much more than rhetorical. It is a consequence of the phenomenological interrogation, revealing an ontological overlapping with the environment or, more specifically, an immersion within the elemental. Lingis describes this immersion in terms of sensuous involution, and the structural access points that reveal our involution in the sensuous realm are levels of sensations.

He argues against a generalised notion—embedded in the paradigm of contemporary scientific observation—that what guides our sensibility and our perception is only impositions or projections onto our surroundings. He questions the account in which perception is regarded as compound reflex reactions and projective interpretations as it ‘disconnects the representations constructed by the working empirical scientist, whose most speculative thought is subject to the order he finds in nature, from his, and everyone’s, perceptual experience.’ He therefore argues that

the movements of perception – both the controlled perception which is scientific observation, and the continual perception which is the scientist’s, and our, life – are neither reactions and adjustments nor intentional and teleological acts, but responses. If perception is not a succession of mechanical determinisms, our perception exercises freedom because it obeys directives it finds in the environment. (1998: 4)

This is a sort of perceptual freedom, which in everyday life is relegated to the background and obscured by our habits. We are led to believe that our interactions with things—defined by their utilitarian role—are initiated by us. Our reactions to elemental factors, on the other hand, are determined by the physics of the natural world and the physiology of our bodies. Yet Lingis maintains that the freedom

exercised by our prereflexive self within the dimension of intercorporeality is framed by directives and invitations to a corporeal dialogue, issued forth by the ambient.

Since Lingis's phenomenology is grounded upon examination of sensation and its modalities it would be useful to outline, at least in a preliminary way, a semantic field in which the mutually supportive but also varying meanings of words such as 'sensation', 'sensibility' and 'sensuality' are at play.

Lingis starts by acknowledging the ambiguity implied in the root term 'sensation'. He notes, 'on the one hand, to sense something is to catch on to the sense of something, its direction, orientation or meaning. On the other hand, to sense is to be sensitive to something, to feel a contact with it, to be affected by it.' The first meaning seems to describe a dynamic situation of intentional engagement; a situation in which our understanding or grasp of something aims at apprehension of the essential aspects of the phenomenon. Although this kind of sensation might give us certain insights and a promise of future fulfilment of the blank spots, it requires an on-going concentration, and a possible change of perspective. It would be at the core of the Merleau-Pontian 'I can': a perception that already expresses meaning and that can, in case of physical phenomena, activate our motility.

The second meaning seems to underscore our openness; our receptivity to something. It implies a response to a directive, to a pre-existing condition that allowed or called for a thing to solicit our attention, to connect with us. It would manifest itself as instantaneous, complete immersion that does not require any further action on our part. By 'complete' I mean its finite temporal character. In the case of somatic sensation it may well be only local, e.g. when a cold metal utensil touches my arm. But whether it is a local somatic sensation, or an all-embracing visceral or emotional impact, it happens instantaneously. The first mode of sensation, as already mentioned, characterised by its activity, was a central theme of *Phenomenology of Perception*.

2.4.1 Sensibility and Pain

Lingis points out that such an understanding of sensation is insufficient and, in fact, secondary as it is lacking a substantial sense of things. It is the latter aspect that is foundational, that which is characterised by our ability to be affected by something that is common both to our body and to the body of any other sensible entity. Lingis explains:

To conceive of things as substances was not only to conceive them as substrates the understanding posits to support the attributes it predicates of them. It is also to sense what is supporting and sustaining in them, the sensible layout as a ground that supports our movements and our aspirations, and as a nourishing medium for life. And there is lacking a sense of the capacity to gratify us, to please us, to delight us and not only to illuminate our understanding, and to pain us, which is involved in the sense of things as nodes of pregnancy and resistance. For to be sentient means that too: not only to catch on to their sense, but to be susceptible and vulnerable with regard to them, sensitive and subject to them. It is even in the midst of things – and not only in the projection into nothingness – that we are mortal. It is in our sensuality, our gratification and our pain, that we sense that we are mortal. (1986: 64)

From the above passage we can draw three structural components that are pivotal for Lingis's critical development of Merleau-Ponty's ontology of flesh. First there is an attempt to think of things as substances, but in a fashion that departs from the traditional sense of the concept: 'not only to conceive them as substrates the understanding posits to support the attributes it predicates of them.' Lingis's sense of substance is circumscribed upon a second characteristic of things, complimenting Merleau-Ponty's understanding of flesh. Things have their 'sensible layout', which renders them inherently open to other sentient beings. But sensibility, in its many forms, and particular to each thing, is also 'a nourishing medium of life.' The ground beneath our feet literally supports our 'movement and our aspirations', while the juicy substance of a piece of fruit literally nourishes our body and mind.

By the same token, however, our belonging to the continuum of sentient beings also makes us vulnerable to them. Pain becomes an emblem of belonging to this sensible-sentient community. In another passage Lingis states:

But pain is at the same time a strange evidence of the continuity of one's own being with that of the world. The plenitude, presence and force of being, with which a thing so securely is, within its own frontiers, is for subjectivity an excess - and strangely, one with the excess its own being is for itself. [...] What

wounds may be the instrument, but what pains is the sensuous element. In pain what oppresses is the light, the heat, the din, the density, the depth as such. In pain the sensuous is an oppression before it is a sense impression, impression of a sense. [...] In all sensation our being exposed and vulnerable to, our being subject to the sensuous element is felt. (1986: 71)

Lingis's recognition of pain as an effect and manifestation of our exposure to the sensuous element is particularly insightful and helpful in tracking the instances of intercorporeality in the embodied practice of Butoh dance. Physical and emotional vulnerability are defining attributes of our condition. Pain and injury, considered obstacles to the achievement of our daily tasks, are concrete events that testify to our ontological intertwining with the sensuous world. It is never just our separate body that somehow implodes and loses its structural integrity. Pain is in fact a further exposure to the world around us, which—owing to scientific objectification—has become so alien to us. But in Butoh dance pain is a portal to a dimension below the level of intentional consciousness, where we fully feel our immersion in the elemental. Dancers explore this sensual nature, the intensity of space, the ground, and other dancers. Their subjection to those various factors becomes a core inspiration for a movement that in its deepest sense is a response, rather than an intention or even expression. Lingis's recourse to Merleau-Ponty seems to be very fitting here and it resonates with my own Butoh experience:

If sensation is the original subjectivity, it is because there is effected in it our original subjection to beings. *The Visible and the Invisible* conceptualized this by speaking of the sensitive being as the locus where there is a folding back of the world upon itself. This inscription of the world upon the subject is the very carnality of existence, the structure of flesh. Merleau-Ponty always sought to explicate it by looking at the overlapping of the visible and motor. (1986: 69)

My investigation into the body in movement and, crucially, in stillness too, revealed to me a sense of our primordial openness to the world. Intentionality of consciousness was not invalidated as mode of cognition, but its competence has been delimited. Curiously, this did not bring an impoverishment of my sensations, but

they became refocussed and more responsive. Air temperature, the quality of the ground, the intensity of the light came to the fore. I discovered that what we commonly call 'passivity' can provide conditions for a deepened awareness, a state of consciousness that is receptive to what Merleau-Ponty called the 'flesh of the world' and which, according to Lingis, we can thematise and experience as elements. Lingis states:

For there is consciousness that is not conscious of some thing. There is sensibility that is not prehension of form. [...] Before sensibility is perception, of forms, it is sensual, sensitive to matter, substance. The things one does perceive one perceives in a medium to which one is sensitive - shadows and forms in the light, tones in air, solids held put and observable on terra firma, detachable, moveable in the heat, resistances in winter, in the monsoon. (1986: 107)

Lingis declares that sensibility—understood as a form of participation with the world prior to the emergence of structured perception—responds to the wider sensuous matrix he calls the elements. Although they are readily accessible to us they escape definition in a strict sense. Our embeddedness within and dependence upon elements such as earth and its gravity, air with its radiance or darkness, heat or coldness and water with its viscosity and fluidity is so fundamental that they elude everyday awareness. Lingis—like Merleau-Ponty in his attempt to describe Flesh—has to resort, for the most part, to a negative portrayal. He says:

The elements are sensuous realities; they are not perceptible frameworks, dimensions, or intelligible structures. The elemental qualities are not properties of underlying substrates. Not contained within surfaces of boundaries, the cold, the dark, the gloom, the savage, the sustaining, the luminous, and the exultant extend in depth indefinitely. They are not terms, not nouns, but free-floating adjectives. (1998: 14)

Their designation seems to embrace various phenomena. Yet, paradoxically, the elements cannot serve as building blocks of a philosophical system. They evade being framed and dissected. They are primordial events. They bring nourishment and

pleasure to sensible entities. The elements are not approached bit-by-bit, perceived from different perspectives, and then learnt about in an incremental way. In Lingis's words:

The sensibility for the elements is not passive recording of a multiplicity of elementary data. It is not apprehension which takes hold of something consistent and coherent. It is not a movement that casts our synergic forces toward some object –objective present across a distance. (1996: 15)

They exist in the purest sense of the word 'manifestation'; they are before our very eyes. They penetrate our bodies, imposing their qualities upon us, pulling us within their depths. 'The sensuous elements are not there [in the radiance of the day or the dark on the night] as a multiplicity that has to be collected or as data that have to be identified, but as depths without surfaces of boundaries.' (1998: 13)

They are characterised by a certain homogeneity, they manifest themselves in their totality. It's not even that they cannot be fragmented and analytically dissected, but it is their essence to make us feel as if engulfed by their effects. Lingis expressed the way in which we are related to the sensual element as 'involution.'⁴⁴ He states:

Sensuality is a movement of involution in a medium. One finds the light by immersion, one is in atmosphere, in sonority, in redolence or in stench, in warmth or in cold. One feels the supporting element of the ground rising up within one's posture and within one's orgasmic prostration and in one's sleep where dreams hover. The elements manifest themselves adverbially, qualifying our movements and our composure. (Lingis 1998: 15)

The term 'involution' conveys a double sense of our intertwining with the elements. On the one hand it clearly designates our immersion in them. This is easy to understand in the case of light and air, and their respective qualities, and in case of the earth's gravity field. But when Lingis says that the elements '[qualify] our movements and composure' he underlines effects on our embodied selves that go

⁴⁴ The etymology of the word 'involution' indicates its Latin roots: *involutio(n-)*, from *involvere* meaning to involve. Its Middle English use signifies 'a part curling inwards', while in contemporary physiology it designates 'a shrinkage of an organ in old age or when inactive'.

beyond our conscious intention. Our bodies respond to the elements by modulating their posture and adjusting their physiologic functions. On a hot summer day our body relaxes and welcomes a touch of the light on the skin. On a cold winter day, on the other hand, we shrink, our movements become stiffer. Similarly, the difference is felt already at the doorstep of my house. By leaving behind the limited space of the flat I feel my gaze reaching into space, immersing itself into the air filled with light or saturated with rain. As most obviously with water, other elements support our bodies in their specific ways too. Lingis describes how the space filled with light carries our gaze:

Visual space is not pure transparency; it is filled with light, intense or sombre, crystalline or mellow, serene or lugubrious. If the light seems neutral when we look at things, that is because its colour, is without surfaces and our eyes do not go to encounter it like an object. Our gaze is immersed in it and sees with its cast, see the colours of things that surface as contrasts with the tone of the light. [...] Each time we look for illuminated things, our gaze refracts off their surfaces into the luminous openness. The light is sometimes so dazzling that we can see nothing through it. Its radiance fills and thickens the space such that the surfaces of gleaming or shadowy things at a distance are dissolved in it.’
(Lingis 1998: 13)

This description reminds me of my own experience in Arles, Provence, in the south of France. This city and region was depicted many times by Vincent Van Gogh. And it was there, on a hot sunny day, while seated in an outdoor café located in the central square that I saw exactly the kind of radiant light that seemed to dissolve the boundaries between distant objects. At the end of the square the space was dense with light that gave the impression of wrapping things in cling film. The experience reminded me, at the time, of Van Gogh’s paintings in which the radiant space seems to fill the spaces between the objects or even encroach upon them.

Lingis makes a final attempt to explicate the essence of the elements by demonstrating how they are taken out of the pragmatic economy to which the separate object is subjected and to which we, as individuals, are so susceptible:

Things, that is, substances that have contours that contain their properties, can be apprehended, detached, and possessed. We identify ourselves and maintain our identity in the midst of things. The elements which extend no horizons of objectives, which pass into no stock that can be recalled, do not lend themselves to appropriation. One cannot make oneself something separate and consolidate oneself by appropriating the light, by making private property and depriving others of the atmosphere, by monopolising the warmth, by expropriating the things distributed over the ground of their support. The light that invades the eyes depersonalises and the anonymity of light illuminates in one's eyes; one sees as eyes of flesh see. The forest murmurs and the rumble of the city invade one's ears that hear as hearing hears. The ground that rises up into one's posture depersonalises; one stands as tree stand, one walks as terrestrial life walks, and one rests as terrestrial life rests and as rocks and sands rest.' (Lingis 1998: 19)

The insight that Lingis offers to us strikes a cord with David Abram's eco-phenomenology invitation to reconnect with a more-than-human world: to acknowledge a kinship with other entities, including a living landscape, i.e. a forest that gives us respite from the busy city life, and the ground that always support our steps. Lingis directs us towards a sense of commonality and enjoyment that arises from our conformity with the elements that support us and other living beings. This is a sense of enjoyment and wonder also evoked by Merleau-Ponty's notion of intercorporeality.

Although it is still true that it is through my body that I experience the world, as soon as I use the language of the sensuous I start to dismantle the barriers that the body-object/body-subject terminology imposed on my surroundings and on my self-apprehension. I allow the surroundings to filter through the porous boundaries of my self. I acknowledge that surrounding beings share with me a constitutive attribute that demands my response. Their substantiality is no longer reduced to their value-barren materiality, but presents itself instead as a site of a sensibility/sensuality dynamic that invites my interaction. To Lingis, the sphere of the sensuous is not some speculative realm, and neither is it a conceptual construct derived from synthesis of discrete data. The sphere of the sensuous is directly accessible to our

body and to our corporeal sensibility. It manifests itself as a most pervasive and concrete directive issuing from the sensual world. Lingis explains:

The directive is received on our sensory-motor bodies, as bodies we have to anchor on the levels down which our vision, our touch, our listening move. This directive weights on us, finalizing our perception toward perceiving a field and not a chaos of drifting and bobbling patterns. Obedience to the levels precedes and makes possible any initiative, any freedom, of sensibility and movement. (Lingis 1998: 38)

Lingis suggests—in fact he posits it as an ontological imperative—that we are capable of an interaction with things operating beneath the level of the everyday utilitarian functions. To be sure, a utilitarian function is not to be dispensed of since it creates its own network of relations, as has been revealed by Heidegger in *Being and Time*. Significantly, however, Lingis focuses on the notion of ‘the sensible’ which changes the perspective perhaps more radically than did the Heideggerian notion of the ‘ready-to-hand’. In Lingis’ discourse, the sensible is given a degree of autonomy that was expressed by the fragmentary insights of Merleau-Ponty’s later work, notably in *Eye and Mind* and later in *The Visible and the Invisible*.

Lingis writes: ‘When we come upon another carnal being moving along the levels of the visible and the tangible where we are moving, we sense that sentient body seeing and touching as we see and touch.’ This is a perspective of the human subject. He goes on, however, to elaborate a more general view:

The environment, open to indefinite variants of the seeing, touching, hearing, with which we are moving in it, is from the first open to a seeing, touching, and hearing that went on before we awakened, can go on on the levels beyond what we see, touch, and hear, and will go on after we return to sleep. The ground supports and the skies are open to movement other than our own. (Lingis 1998: 37)

In the above words Lingis acknowledges a diversity of life-world and goes beyond the phenomenology of human perception, developing the Merleau-Pontian project of ontology of flesh.

Lingis returns once again to the classic phenomenological case of hands touching, first introduced by Husserl and later reused by Merleau-Ponty:

When our right hand touches our left, it makes contact with the level which directs the pressure and the pace movement that makes the pulp and rough texture thinly strewn with hairs of that left hand palpable. But at the same time the right hand feels rising up in our left hand a movement of feeling to meet it, and feels that movement of feeling as variant of its own movement. (Lingis 1998: 37)

Lingis's descriptive attentiveness matches—and may even surpass—that of Merleau-Ponty. He mentions that in the act of palpating a right hand is exposed to and 'directed' by the left to the level of the 'rough texture thinly strewn with hairs'. It may well be that perception of hairs is peripheral to the content of this interaction, and yet if there are hairs on the surface of the skin then they are emissaries of the depth of the body, and additional stimuli colouring the sensations of both hands. This observation testifies to Lingis's utmost commitment to concrete experience. It is the detail within our experience that assures us that we are in touch with the real world. And by the same token it is details such as the hairs on the hand that assures us that philosophy is not inclined to promote an *a priori* conceived truth, or hastily present a schema or a model of experience, but that in the first instant philosophy offers us a description of a lived world. Only paired and tested within our own experience can it claim a degree of commonality. Intuiting the essential is possible only on the ground of the concrete.⁴⁵ An incessant transformation or pulsation of our embodied experience precludes any schematisation of concrete being and leaves the field ever open to new shades of sensation.

When Merleau-Ponty proposed the possibility of experiencing reversibility between the bodies of two people—in a way similar to sensations experienced by two hands of the same body—he used the example of two people shaking hands. Lingis transfers this example to a scenario where responsiveness goes beyond the

⁴⁵ I am here using the notion 'essence' in the sense identified by Lingis in Merleau-Ponty's *The Visible and The Invisible* as 'sensuous sense, described sometimes as a matrix or pregnancy, sometimes as an utterance.' (Lingis, 1986: 60)

cultural habit of shaking hands as welcome or goodbye and, as such, is more pronounced:

When our hand takes hold of the hand of a child or a feeble person to guide it to the handrail of the listing ship, the movement of feeling and the diagram of force of our hands merges into that of the child or feeble person. We feel our sensibility displace itself into the other and to be a variant of that of the other. The other's body is not first a material mass stationed before us and exposed to our inspection and its sentient life not a hypothesis we form in our mind to explain its movement. From the first we find ourselves accompanied, in our movements down the levels of the field, by other sensibilities, other sentient beings. (Lingis 1998: 37)

Here the sense of intercorporeality is brought to light. Sensibility permeating the entire perceptual field—ours and that of the other—is a domain through which the company with other sentient beings is given.

2.5 Phenomenologies of Dance

Now let us have a look at the concept of intercorporeality within the context of contemporary dance and somatic practice, as derived from the work of three contemporary phenomenologists: Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, Sondra Fraleigh and Susan Kozel. Crucially, each of them has in their biographies illustrious carriers as dancers, choreographers, dance educators, and somatic practitioners, allowing them to gain intimate experiential knowledge of the potential of the human body and its relational nature. In their capacities as academics they have critically engaged with the philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty—notably with his late thought—in the course of which they have acknowledged its originality, pointed out its shortcomings and offered compelling avenues for further development. Since my research aims to elucidate the Merleau-Pontian notion of intercorporeality by engaging with Butoh dance's implicit philosophy of the incarnated subject and the body's relationship with the sensuous environment as

experienced through bodily training, I find their conceptual and methodological bases useful.

2.5.1 Embodied metaphysics

I will start with Sondra Fraleigh's stance towards notions of metaphysics and embodiment in the context of her engagement with feminist theory. She reiterates in several places how deeply was she influenced by the theories of Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva and Judith Butler. However, she also admits that recent developments in the fields of existentialism and phenomenology, represented by Alphonso Lingis, David Abram and Bruce Wilshire, at times placed her on a precarious footing with gender and body politics. She reads the body of work produced by feminist theory through the prism of her own dance and somatic practice, which compels her to preserve certain notions even if they are 'unpopular' in the feminist discourse. With respect to metaphysics she writes:

I take a dancer's approach to metaphysics, a sometimes unpopular word in feminism, but one that draws me to it, and which I hope to provoke into whirlpools and calms. Continuing to develop the terms of embodiment, as I have elsewhere, in *Dancing Identity* I expand lived body concepts beyond theatrical dance to encompass a broader conception and to press toward dance as metaphor and metaphysics. (2004: 20–21)

Fraleigh here uses the expression 'lived body'. This chimes with the language of Sheets-Johnstone and Kozel, who also derive their analyses from the close observation of the moving body—sometimes a dancing human body and sometimes a moving animal body. None of them is afraid of animism, which, according to Sheets-Johnstone, promotes a sense of evolutionary continuity between non-human beings and ourselves. For Kozel it serves as a strategy to avoid 'the dual grasp of anthropocentrism and technocentrism pervading our Western industrial societies.' (2007: 225) Animism, which is evoked by Merleau-Ponty's notion of reversibility, is less likely than anthropomorphism to be 'a sneaky anthropocentrism, the posting of the human being at the centre of meaning and value.' (2007: 224)

Fraleigh also takes issue with a critical evaluation of the notion of ‘embodiment’ because of its religious background and the insertion of dualism, as purported by Judith Butler. In turn, Fraleigh sees a useful dynamic between its structural elements and its underlying meaning implying a connection with animate life. She declares:

I like ‘embodiment’ as a nondualistic process descriptive. It contains material intelligence (body) and the transformative prefix ‘em-,’ which gives it motion. ‘To be embodied’ is quite different from ‘to have a body,’ which splits subject from object and indicates ‘possession’ as the outcome – hence, possessive materialism: self-mastery, mastery of others, owning bodies. The possibility of using the verbal infinitive form ‘to embody’ activates the more passive word ‘body’. (2004: 21)

She also adds another dimension of ‘embodiment’ which seems to imply what Merleau-Ponty calls depth, or a vertical axis connecting the human with the non-human; a sphere of the prereflective that links us with the natural world and aboriginal cultures.

I also like the metaphysics that ‘embodiment’ implies – the ongoing mystery ruminating behind reflection. The inseparability and interactivity of all animate life, the embodiment of earth, animals, and insects, is captured in a word. (2004: 21)

Fraleigh also indicates that her particular methodological stance—grounded in movement and somatic work—allows her to think about nature and culture under the umbrella of embodied metaphysics. She writes: ‘There is a sense in which dance and somatic process helps us to conceive of an embodied metaphysics. They open up the manner in which nature and culture are embodied in our ‘metaphysical artefacts.’’ (2004: 21) She here uses the notion ‘metaphysical artefacts’ to include phenomena—both material and transitory—that bear a human mark. She justifies this use by arguing that ‘manifestation of metaphysics are human inventions, tracings of human history that reflect how we came to be (and record) who we are’ (2004: 21) She therefore feels entitled to extend the linguistics of metaphysics and to assign to the

term ‘artefact’ both verbal and non-verbal forms. Hence she does not privilege the metaphysical artefacts of language over those of art, architecture, ritual and story. Not surprisingly, therefore, she includes dance as a particular case of these metaphysical tracings, or human artefacts. It exists, she explains ‘through the dancer and for the time being, *an art and a fact* both material and evanescent. As embodied, particular dances become apparent as corporeal artefacts, but they are not the only ones.’ (2004: 22)

In another instance of revealing her deeply somatic and ecological inspiration and mitigating stance towards a radical anti-essentialist paradigm, she states:

As a dancer and somatic movement therapist, I am interested in moving in tune with nonhuman nature and in the constant rediscovery of the nature of the human body. I have doubted radical anti-essentialist feminism even as I want to defend some of the liberal (original anti-essentialist) positions of Beauvoir. If biology is not destiny, as she claims (1949), our historical position now requires that we nevertheless affirm our kinship with the natural world: animals and plants, rocks and rivers, sky and water. (2004: 22)

In a manner attuned with the eco-phenomenological perspective of David Abram she says:

I would rather see how we all, men and women alike, have a home in nature, our here and now obligations to take care of the nature that supports us, and how dance/movement can give us the somatic means to explore the nature-culture continuum of our human bodily being. Our body is both a natural and social phenomenon; our dances, innate movement potentials, and our natural capacity for healing provide evidence of this. (2004: 22)

She admits that just like David Abram and Alphonso Lingis she seeks to ‘heal our bodily rupture with nature.’ (2000: 55)

Another issue that resonates between all three authors, and which at the same time challenges Merleau-Ponty’s analysis in *Phenomenology of Perception*, is the following question: In an attempt to understand the nature of motility should we not begin with extraordinary rather than diminished kinetic capacities? The question is

asked directly by Maxine Sheets-Johnstone in her essay ‘Kinesthetic Memory’. It arises in the context of her criticising Merleau-Ponty for basing his analysis on the pathological case of Schneider, a war veteran who lost his kinaesthetic and proprioceptive sense. She claims that ‘a methodological focus on the extraordinary [e.g. dance, but also physical theatre or martial arts] has the power to bring [...] dynamics understandings to light because it magnifies rather than constricts subtleties and complexities inherent in kinesthetic experience and kinesthetic memory.’ (2009: 275) She then criticises Merleau-Ponty’s notion of ‘Body Image’ (*schema corporel*) for falling short of fulfilling its dynamic promise, as ‘a veritable kinetic dynamics is not reducible to a ‘[bodily] attitude directed towards a certain existing or possible task.’ (2009: 269) Merleau-Ponty, according to Sheets-Johnstone, relegated ‘consciousness of movement’ to an amorphous background that lies outside of our awareness, paradoxically manifesting itself only in pathological cases. She undermines Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the habit body by claiming that it misses the sense of kinaesthesia. She also criticises it for its being the body of an adult without a history, while ‘in both a neurological and existential sense, kinaesthesia and kinesthetic memory are essential to progressive developmental achievements and capacities’ (2009: 265) She traces this tendency within certain ontological positions:

Adultist views of oneself in the world, perhaps particularly ontologically – orientated “phenomenological” views (e.g. Heidegger), ignore the complex nature of infancy and its intricate developmental history, a history without which one could not attain adult habits, let alone adultist view of oneself in the world. (2009: 265)

Merleau-Ponty attempts to avoid the traps of the representations of intellectualism and the ‘extensive sensations’ of empiricism by ‘tying subject and object – body and world – together through a ‘motor intentionality’ that ‘cease[s] to draw a distinction between the body as a mechanism in itself and consciousness as being for itself’. Yet, in doing so, he relegates veritable kinaesthetic experience and kinaesthetic memory into the sphere of anonymous, prepersonal I. (2009: 266)

Sheets-Johnstone instead proposes we use the notion of a ‘kinetic melody’, a term coined by Aleksandr Romanovich Luria who is regarded a founding father of neuropsychology.⁴⁶ According to Luria, kinetic melodies are inscribed in the body as ‘integral kinaesthetic structures’ (Luria 1973: 176) and they are thus, in the words of Sheets-Johnstone ‘essentially, i.e., in a living, experiential sense, not brain events, but corporeally resonant ones, in–the–flesh dynamic patterns of movement that are initiated - and run off.’ (2009: 255) The notion of kinetic melody opposes pointillist conceptions of movement and states that ‘movement is always a process with a temporal course that requires a continuous chain of interchanging impulses.’ (Luria, 1973: 176) Similarly, kinaesthetic memories, as parts of ‘integral kinesthetic structures’ are inscribed in the body ‘as specific bodily dynamics, dynamics that, as enacted, are at once familiar and tailored distinctively to the particular situation at hand.’ (2009: 258) Maxine Sheets-Johnstone clarifies this by saying that for example the kinaesthetic memory of walking is

not a memory of positions but of whole body dynamics, which is based not on bodily sensation – localised, positional happenings – but on the perception of movement. In short, kinesthetic memories are constituted through and through by dynamic, not sensational, sedimentations. (2009: 274)

She is therefore able to conclude that ‘there is in fact no position that the body is *in* in walking – any more than there is a position that the wind is *in* blowing, or that a wave is *in* rolling forward.’ Her foundational dynamic understanding of human movement is inseparable from her own experience as a dancer and dance educator. That is why she can claim that ‘beginning with extraordinary [e.g. dance, physical theatre] rather than diminished kinetic capacities means beginning with “the thing itself” and gaining direct knowledge about the inherent dynamics of movement.’ (2009: 275) Coincidentally, a similar attitude is upheld in the Eastern—particularly Japanese and Chinese—traditions of body-mind cultivation. Yasuo Yuasa, author of *The Body, Self-Cultivation, and Ki-Energy*, points out that ‘in the East, the mind-body problem has been approached focusing always on the exceptional, elite

⁴⁶ A. R Luria, *The Working Brain*, trans. Basil Haigh (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1973) I am quoting Luria after Maxine Sheets-Johnstone from her essay ‘Kinesthetic Memory’ in *The Corporeal Turn. An Interdisciplinary Reader* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2009)

experience.’ (1993: 62) By this he means experiences of those who through long periods of training—such as martial art, performing arts and meditation practices—have acquired a high degree of body-mind ability. It has to be said, however, that in his *Cézanne's Doubt* (1945), *Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence* (1952), and *Eye and Mind* (1960) Merleau-Ponty’s description of the intertwining between visual and tactile experiences were often derived from analysis of works of accomplished painters, such as Klimt, Renoir and Cézanne. By making reference to their own written reflections upon the artistic process Merleau-Ponty explored how a painter must immerse his body in the world in order to manifest it most truly in art. Merleau-Ponty interprets Cézanne’s description of himself as ‘thinking in painting’ as reporting a process in which ‘vision becomes gesture’. He described the act of painting as interlacing the visual and kinaesthetic; an act where it is impossible to separate out where perception begins and movement ends. It may be said, therefore, that Merleau-Ponty was aware of the shortcomings of his initial method and, given his lack of expertise in dance, he would have welcomed a better-informed description of contemporary dancers/phenomenologists.

Let me come therefore return to ideas that the authors leading this section have a particular insight into, namely the self-perception of the embodied self in the act of dancing. Kozel expresses starts by saying:

The dancing body is an intense example of the entwinement between identity and difference. Dance is an active exploration of that region where the subjective control over the body is at its limits. [...] Space becomes tangible, sometimes assisting with the lift of a leg or an abrupt turn, sometimes resisting as though it were a leaden substance slowing us down. (2007: 38)

Kozel regards the dancing body as a liminal space in which the identity of the dancer is fluid and dynamic. The agency of the dancer ebbs and flows, mental control intensifies and is, in another instance, weakened, almost released. The flow of the movement, the force of the motion—all that we call the phenomenon of dance—encompasses the space and saturates it with its own energy and, on the other hand, adheres to the force of gravity. To Kozel an action of dance brings about a deepened awareness of intercorporeality, its constitutive dynamic of reversibility animating our relationship with the surroundings:

Each moment I challenge my corporeal map, shift it somewhat, repattern it. This is done by means of intercorporeality and embodied perception. When I perform I am aware of inserting myself into a context, almost an inhalation and exhalation. Performance is never one-directional, never simply exposition from my body outward, and this is where Merleau-Ponty's dynamic of reversibility comes to bear; performance involves the awareness of being in a state of reception and initiation between inside and outside, modulation and response. The slight dislocation achieved through hyper-reflection yields the potential for transformation; like a hiatus (or as Merleau-Ponty would say, *écart*) it allows for an adjustment of action while in the flow of action. It is important for this not to be seen as a binary flip between thinking and doing – there is an entwining of action and awareness. It is in this sense that phenomenologies are performed: 'Reflection is not just on experience, reflection is a form of experience itself' (Varela, Thomas and Rosch 1993: 27).

Further, this permits for the scope of ethics within performance, diffusing the implicit critique that performance is fundamentally narcissistic. (2007: 70)

There is a richness in this description that warrants a further, closer, reading. In performance—which in accord with Maxine Sheets-Johnstone could be regarded as an instant of extraordinary corporeal and kinaesthetic awareness—the self is making and undoing its own perceptual boundaries. This highly dynamic event reveals a break, a gap—in Merleau-Ponty's vocabulary, an *écart*—in the reflective process of embodied consciousness. Innate responsiveness to the surrounding ambient—be it another dancer, the stage, or the public—intertwines with the instantaneous motor initiatives of the body in flow. This gap within the dynamics of reversibility allows, as Sheets-Johnstone testifies, for an 'adjustment of action' without breaking a flow of action. Thinking and doing are intertwined, maintaining a flow of a kinaesthetic melody. This coexistence of both bodily and conscious dimensions—which are, according to Merleau-Ponty, but two sides of the same coin—marked however by this irreducible dehiscence 'yields potential for transformation.' The reversibility obtaining on the axis performer—world in its multiple forms—reinforces the core objective of performance, putting into question the shallow notion that it is about self-expression and display. According to Kozel: 'performance is not about display.

It is attention, perception and thought set in motion in such a way as to kindle, or ignite, the space for change.’ (2007: 71)

This characterisation of performance resonates with my experience of Butoh dance. To me Butoh dance was precisely about an intensity of attention; perception and thought animating my body. The sense of transformation was often very subtle and could not always be permanently interiorised so that its effect could be taken beyond the stage or workshop context. In fact, the transformation would most often be fleeting, impermanent. But this is nevertheless a profound experience as it further underlines a dynamic and fluid nature of embodied subjectivity and that more permanent changes of our perception require sustained practice. And this is precisely a stance of Eastern somatic and performative practices, which, relying on years of training in habituating our kinaesthetic and somatic responses, aim at achieving an extraordinary somatic awareness, where body and mind are harmonised, allowing for unobstructed reciprocity within the intercorporeal network of relations.

In this context Sondra Fraleigh also recalls Eastern self-cultivation traditions like Zen and yoga. She acknowledges that they ‘take up the question of being through practice, seeking the basis of human nature by investigating the body-mind as transformational.’ (2004: 30) Based on the principle of no distinction between the metaphysical and physical dimensions, Eastern traditions unify them in lived experience, offering self-cultivation practice as a means ‘to free the self from the dominance of mental forces and the experience of separation, and we can experience the bodies of others through the unlimited nature of our own body.’ (2004: 31)

When Maxine Sheets-Johnstone describes an act of dance improvisation she talks about the existentially resonant body, which could be seen as framed by spatial and temporal aspects within this event. She refers to a spatial dimension as a context of aliveness, towards which the body can be attuned, although which in everyday life it is often oblivious of. In her essay ‘Can the Body Ransom Us?’ she indicates that the route to de-objectification of the body, recovering our existence as a living presence, leads through an awakening to the very spatiality and possibilities of our being. She says:

Lacking a context of aliveness, we could hardly resonate as a living presence. Even the paths that revive the senses do not exist in a vacuum. They are found within the context of other people, at least in the beginning, and always in the context of a particular surround: a room, a studio, a beach, a park, a meadow, a

backyard. Our immediate presence is always somewhere and the form and quality of our relationship to that somewhere is an integral part of our first-person world. In fact, redemption in part lies precisely in awakening ourselves to the spatiality of our being and attuning ourselves to its demands and possibilities. (Sheets-Johnstone 2009: 25)

Sheets-Johnstone suggests that it is tactile sense that continuously anchors the body in its immediate environment: ‘Like all other animals, we are always in touch with *something*, however far from focal attention that tactilely-felt something might be – the inside of our shoe, for example, or the shirt on our back, or the chair on which we sit, or the pencil with which we write.’ And, she adds ‘surface sensitivity is consistently there, present, in the flesh – in animate form.’ (2009: 138) The exciting consequence of this ontological condition is that all living things ‘are always potentially at the threshold of the world, sensitive to its nuances and portents.’ (2009: 138) She underlines, however, that to experience this ‘flesh of objects’—a concept introduced initially by Sartre and later utilised by Merleau-Ponty—we have to become attentive to their sensible tissue. In order to discover ‘the quintessential palpability of things – everyday things such as our clothes, the air, the wind – we have to attend finely and without haste. We have to open ourselves to the sensuous link connecting our flesh with theirs; we have to allow our own flesh to be awakened by theirs.’ (2009: 139) The above words resonate with David Abram’s call to recover in our everyday life the sense of our spacious body as intrinsically open and responsive to the world. Similarly, Alphonso Lingis revealed to us our involution in the sensuous world and traced our encounters with things along the levels of perception. Once the existentially resonant body immerses itself in movement improvisation a sort of collapse of temporality occurs. Sheets-Johnstone states:

An existentially resonant body creates a particular dynamic world with no intermediates. The world it creates is neither the given world nor an immutable world, but a protean world created moment by moment. It is a world experienced as an elongated or ongoing present, one in which there are no hereafters, nor sooner-or-laters, no definitively expected end or places of arrival, and so on. (2009: 35)

In my experience of Butoh dance the flow of kinaesthetic action intertwined with the intensity of proprioceptive stillness, alternate temporal awareness. As Sheets-Johnstone describes it, a temporal horizon is compressed as the moving body saturates the space. Perhaps it is a manifestation of phenomena that Merleau-Ponty referred to in his *Notes*. He there began to describe a temporal dynamic as chiasm or *Ineinander*; past and present enveloping each other. Their mutual intertwining evokes the same process that defines flesh; a central concept of Merleau-Ponty's ontology. Seen from the other perspective, dance takes on attributes of the element, in a sense discussed by Lingis, but also complementary to Merleau-Ponty's view. The body is captured by a process initiated by itself and with it space and time. The duality of past and presence is eliminated and time itself is grasped as being or, in Merleau-Ponty's words, as 'the time-thing, the time-being.' (2009: 200)

Such a rendering of time and space bears a strong resemblance with the traditional Japanese notions of *utsuroi* and *ma*. They describe a state of body-mind in ritual enactment. This is characterised by a particular sensitivity, one that is highly attuned to the immediacy of sensual experience, and where the spatio-temporal dichotomy is suspended. I will come back to this in the following chapter.

Integrating the postulates of the perspectives reviewed in this chapter, I underline that we need both critical and somatic practices, in order to attain to not just the body but also *with it* to its complex, intercorporeal network of connections.

It is therefore crucial for my investigation to open a discursive space that will allow us to not only think differently about the body but that will also enable a more intense experience of corporeal existence. What is to be expected from such an enhancement is, in the first instance, an appreciation of being grounded within more general corporeal structures (even though these are not distinct from the social and cultural spheres). This, in turn, will lead to a retrieval and enhancement of bodily awareness within inter-subjective life. In the last instance, however, this would promote more inclusive and less hierarchical relationships between non-human and human realms. To quote Maxine Sheets-Johnstone:

Through an awakening to our own flesh, we open ourselves to a profound understanding of what it means to be animate – what D.H. Lawrence once described as being 'alive and in the flesh and part of the living incarnate cosmos.' The source of this profound understanding is not tucked away in our

brains but inheres in the morphological structures and sensuous densities of our own bodies. (2009: 147)

This postulate will find its reflection in my engagement with Butoh dance—the importance of which has already been indicated. Butoh dance offers an empirical space in which concrete bodies can access the dimension of the lived experience of intercorporeality. As such, it will serve as a sort of ‘laboratory’ that can intensify the sensations of our ‘own’ body and which enhances the awareness of interrelatedness with people, animals, things and space. The Merleau-Pontian ontology of flesh, on the other hand, with its notions of intertwinement, reversibility, synergy, and ‘the Flesh’, suggests a language in which this phenomenon can be gathered and described.

Chapter III

Conceptual framework of Japanese Body–Mind–World theory

Indian and Chinese philosophies have tried not so much to dominate existence as to be the echo or sounding board of our relationship to being. Western philosophy can learn from them to rediscover the relationship to being and initial option which gave it birth, and to estimate the possibilities we have shut off from in becoming “Westerners” and perhaps reopen them.⁴⁷

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 1964, 139

Introduction

This chapter presents conceptual principles that underpin theories and practices shaping a unique outlook of Japanese culture on human relationship with the natural world in terms of intercorporeal responsiveness. I am assuming that many Westerners have heard of, if not witnessed such cultural phenomena of Japan as Kabuki or Noh theatre, martial art of Aikido, Zen mediation or tea ceremony (*Chado*) or appreciated a Japanese flower arrangements (*Ikebana*). In these forms, and many others, Japanese culture expresses its unmistakably, distinctive character. Although each of them has their own set of rituals, gestures and idiosyncratic protocols of behaviour, they aim at certain perceptual experience, namely a higher level of body mind integration and attunement with the natural world. Butoh dance is a continuation of this tradition.

Yet, the philosophical and religious roots of these activities are often highly syncretic. As Robert Carter, an academic and author of numerous texts devoted to the analysis of Japanese religion, philosophy and art, with a particular interest in the ethical trajectory of these practices in Japan, states “...the Japanese are born into *Shintō*, live ethical lives as Confucians and Neo-Confucians, and die Buddhists.”⁴⁸ Yet it seems both impossible and implausible to separate and isolate influences in such a tidy and precise way.⁴⁹ Given a complex network of intellectual influences

⁴⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, p. 139 trans. R.C. McCleary, Evanstone, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 1964, p.139

⁴⁸ Robert E. Carter, *Encounter with Enlightenment. A study of Japanese Ethics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001).

⁴⁹ Firstly, Neo-Confucianism is an amalgamation of Confucian, Buddhist and Taoist teachings and practices. If the re-reading of anything entering Japan from the perspective of *Shintō* is taken into account, it becomes easier to say what is ‘Japanese’ than it is to say what is ‘pure’ Confucianism or Buddhism. What is clear is that the ‘flavour’ of Confucianism or Buddhism is present, although it is sometimes possible to find influences that have been adopted by the Japanese with little or no change.

coming to Japan from other South-East Asian cultures, notably Chinese and Indian, it is tricky to talk about purely Japanese philosophy.⁵⁰ Therefore, it will not be my main objective to distil pure Japanese philosophical thought⁵¹. I will present what the Japanese philosophical and religious traditions has to say in the subject matter of the body–mind complex and its relationship with the world in order to unearth the practice-infused philosophical style that contributed to the formation of Butoh dance as a Japanese form of art, permeated by desire to explore, inhabit and ameliorate the psychosomatic dimension of human existence.

3.1 Different paradigm

With these presuppositions in hand, I can attempt a conceptual reconstruction of the ‘body’ through a mutually corroborative philological and philosophical analysis. This will firstly require an examination of the language in which this notion of ‘body’ is couched, and then a verification of the direction established by this analysis by pursuing its philosophical implications in the broad tradition. Following Roger Ames’s direction indicated in his article “The Meaning of Body in Classical Chinese Philosophy” (1993) we will be provided with an explicatory apparatus. I say ‘direction’ here rather than ‘conclusions’ in recognition of the speculative and hence tentative nature of this kind of hermeneutical analysis.

Ames endorses the view that the mind and body are interdependent and as such can only be understood in reference to each other. This in turn allows him to argue that a ‘person’ is properly regarded as a “psychosomatic process” in classical Chinese philosophy. (1993, 158) The expression ‘psychosomatic process’ lends itself particularly aptly to my understanding of the body-mind in the context of Japanese philosophy. Perhaps even more so than the phrase ‘psychosomatic unity’, as the

With the addition of Zen to the mix as a distinctively Japanese take on Buddhism (with strong a Chinese influence), and the result is a way of looking at the world and each other which is both unique and complex.

⁵⁰ Perhaps the most significant factor in determining Japan’s openness to the importing of Chinese intellectualism was the adoption of the Chinese logographic writing system (*Hanzi* in Chinese, *Kanji* in Japanese). Abstract, philosophical or religious ideas are still expressed in Chinese characters and pronounced in a way that emulates the Chinese pronunciation of words depicted by these characters. Therefore it should come as no surprise that Japanese thought was strongly influenced by Chinese culture, which also served as mediator in spreading Indian ideas, which are derived from systems originally created on the continent. The theoretical discourse on the body, and the related medical paradigm are particularly clear examples of an ongoing interchange.

⁵¹ I will, however, try to outline the structural interconnection between particular philosophical or religious influences, briefly indicate a genealogy of key concepts and, as far as is necessary for the reader who might not be familiar with the cultural history of Japan, briefly introduce key historical facts that had a bearing on the crystallisation of Japanese culture with its many layers.

latter somehow implies or at least lends itself to an interpretation that is being finite and internally unified but as the same time limited and closed. Whilst the 'psychosomatic process' process, not only assures us of internal integrity but also suggests porous boundaries rather than limits, and a dynamic open-ended exchange between the body-mind and the environment, thus bringing us closer to an understanding of the mode of being as intercorporeality.

In adopting Ames' methodological statement regarding Chinese philosophy and its main presupposition to Japanese philosophy of the body, I am convinced that in crucial aspects Japanese and Chinese views of the human body and its relationship to the world are concordant.

Thomas Kasulis reinforces my position informing us that traditional Japanese philosophers, in much the same way as their Chinese predecessors and contemporaries, devoted their attention to the problem of how the body-mind complex works and develops. This focus tended to favour an ethical and practical approach towards the body-mind. Kasulis underlines the importance of the word 'develops' in order to suggest the major difference with traditional Western discourse. He summarises it in following words: "Western philosophies seem to assume the mind-body relation, whatever it might be, is fixed. Yet, the assumption among Japanese philosophers has traditionally been that the mind-body complex is capable of increasing levels of integration. In other words, rather than asking how the mind and body are related, the Japanese have more often asked how the mind and body become increasingly interrelated."⁵²

This approach towards the human being as a psychosomatic process, perhaps aspiring to unity and intertwined with the world, was taken up in the West in a consistent, although mainly theoretical manner, with the advent of phenomenology, or to be precise with its existential variant, presented by such philosophers as Sartre, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty.

Thomas Kasulis provides another noteworthy insight that permits us to appreciate a different point of departure in Japanese philosophy concerning its relationship to the body-mind complex. We generally accept that Western body-mind dualism was, if not initiated, than at least exemplified in the thought of Descartes, who found a separation of thought from somaticity a necessary step. His

⁵² Thomas P Kasulis, "The Body - Japanese Style," in *Self as Body in Asian Theory and Practice*, 299-319 (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), p303.

point of reference, in which the ultimate criterion of truth and apodictic certainty shined through, was mathematics. It was to be expected, therefore, that in his reflection upon the theorems of geometry the senses had to be mistrusted and bracketed as it were. The truths of geometry were not related to an individual perception of a particular corporeal object but had a universal, logical validity. Kasulis, however, asks whether aforementioned separation of thought and perception were as important, and consequently came to define the philosophical mode of investigation if he “had been a pianist or a composer instead”? Kasulis hastens to add, recognising the historical importance of the distinction between logical forms and sensory dependent knowledge, that Descartes’ separation was not wrong itself. It certainly has a valid area of application. What Kasulis tries to bring to the fore is the awareness of the existence of culturally specific paradigms. Descartes privileged particular types of experiences declaring them “more paradigmatically important than others” in the context of *zeitgeist* of his culture. (Kasulis 1993, 304)

In Japan, however, such paradigmatically important experiences are found within the fields of the religious, aesthetic and moral life. This line of argument focuses on the fact that problems of the body-mind relationship and intercorporeality are predominantly engaged from the practical perspective. Kasulis’ comprehensive statement, echoing Merleau-Ponty’s appreciation of Chinese and Indian philosophies, merits quotation as it indicates the benefits of reflecting upon Japanese thought for the critical reevaluation of our stance, being aware at the same time of the inevitable limitations of such a project:

The Japanese present us with an alternative philosophical tradition, one which diverges from ours primarily in what it has considered to be the important questions to ask about our somaticity. Although our exploration of Japanese philosophies of the body may not help us find answers to the questions raised in our own tradition, it may help us to see the context of our own questions more clearly. And we even may decide that for our purposes today, we are no longer asking the right questions. (1993, 304)

3.1.2 Process ontology

In his discussion of the underlying premises of Chinese philosophy of the body, Ames elaborates the notion of ‘polarism’ introduced by David L. Hall in his work “Process and Anarchy: A Taoist Vision of Creativity” (1978) devoted to the analysis of the Taoist notion of cosmogony.⁵³ Polarism is a notion that stands in opposition to the Western dualistic paradigm and serves as a major principle in the explanation of the initial formulation and evolution of classical Chinese metaphysics. Ames defines polarism as “the unity of two organismic processes which require each other as a necessary condition for being what they are. In this paradigm, each existent is auto-generative and self-determinate. Each participant in existence is ‘so-of-itself,’ and does not derive its meaning and order from some transcendent source.” (Ames 1993, 159). He acknowledges that there is a risk of inconsistency in asserting that each particular is self-creative and yet can only be accounted for by its symbiotic relationship with every other particular. The initial tension within this paradigm is also underscored by David L. Hall in his later book *Eros and Irony* (1982) where he notes: “The great difficulty for the radical view of creativity is to account for the apparent interconnectedness of things given the fact that each process is self-creative. It is the polar character of each process that establishes the ground for such an explanation.”⁵⁴ Roger Ames expounds on the notion of polarity in this context, which resolves the tension between interconnectedness and self-determinate, or auto-generative character of each existent: “The notion of ‘self’ in the locution ‘so-of-itself’ has a polar relationship with ‘other.’ In the process ontology underlying this system, each particular is a consequence of every other, such that there is no contradiction in saying that each particular is both self-determinate and determined by every particular. That is, the ‘other’ particulars which make up existence are, in fact, constitutive of ‘self.’ The principle distinguishing feature of polarism is that each ‘pole’ can only be explained by reference to the other. ‘Left’ requires ‘right,’ ‘up’ requires ‘down,’ *yin* requires *yang*, and ‘self’ requires ‘other.’” (Ames 1993, 159-160).

In spelling out the difference between dualistic and polaristic paradigms, Ames says:

⁵³ David L. Hall, “Process and Anarchy: A Taoist Vision of Creativity,” *Philosophy East and West* (University of Hawai'i Press) 28, no. 3 (July 1978): 271-285.

⁵⁴ David L Hall, *Eros and Irony*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982), p. 248

The separateness implicit in dualistic explanations of relationships conduces to an essentialist interpretation of the world, a world of “things” characterised by discreteness, finality, closedness, determinateness, independence, a world in which one thing is related to the other extrinsically.”(1993, 160)

By contrast, a polar explanation of relationships gives rise to an organismic interpretation of the world. It is a world of process, as Ames says, which is characterised by “interconnectedness, interdependence, openness, mutuality, indeterminateness, complementarity, correlativity, coextensiveness, a world in which continuous processes are related to each other intrinsically.” (1993, 160)

Completing his exposition of polarism, Ames stresses that the use of dualistic categories such as reality/appearance, self/other, subject/object, mind/body, form/matter, to mention just a few, is not only inappropriate in the context of “polar metaphysics”, but a source of serious distortions. Polarism has, according to Ames, “its own correlative sets of terminologies which are applied in explanation of the dynamic cycles and processes of existence: differentiating/condensing, scattering/amalgamating, dispersing/coagulating, waxing/waning.” (*ibid*)

The above set of exemplary categories evidently has an experiential origin and, when looked from the comparative philosophy perspective, corresponds and complements Merleau-Pontian ontology of flesh animated by process concepts such as chiasm, reversibility, dehiscence, spreading, etc.⁵⁵

Merleau-Ponty’ ontology of flesh expressed in his lectures assembled under the collective title *Nature* and in his unfinished book *The Visible and the Invisible* is a consistent project to overcome inherited Western dualism. He proposes a concept of embodied life necessary situated beneath the division between consciousness and body, thought and extension, memory and matter. As Mark N. Hansen, an exponent of Merleau-Ponty’s thought states “Merleau-Ponty saw his task from the very beginning to be that of undermining distinction [between consciousness and object] along with other tributary to it: spontaneity and receptivity, activity and passivity, *pour-soi* and *en-soi*.” (205, 232) It is significant that Merleau-Ponty found an inspiration for his ontological turn, in analysis of notions of nature and life derived

⁵⁵ An in-depth analysis of Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology of Flesh, with the above terms as part of a conceptual framework, was presented in the Chapter 2.

from the biological sciences. In other words Merleau-Ponty had to undertake a paradigmatic turn, away from the mathematical and physical model of Cartesian thought and towards the philosophical concept of life – a step that shows a convergence with polarism or process ontology of the East.

The very formulation of the concept of flesh distances his thought from the binary oppositions. Flesh is not a fact of collection of fact; it is neither matter nor spirit. The flesh represents an element, an element, which enters into the composition of everything and thus appears in everything, it makes everything be what it is. As an element it is *the style* of all things and appears in everything and everywhere, but itself it does not appear. It also implies underlying unity between an individual, a lived body, and the world because both are flesh. There is no more of absolute difference between the body and mind, not even between consciousness and the world. They both are seen as processes occurring with the flesh, or wild being as he calls sometimes. Beneath the apparent duality of consciousness and objects lies flesh. This entails that humans are mixed with being and gathered up with things into a fabric of being. In a passage from his *Notes* Merleau-Ponty writes:

Being is the “place” where the ”modes of consciousness” are inscribed as structuration of Being [...] and where the structurations of Being are modes of consciousness. The in-itself-for-itself integration takes place not in the absolute consciousness, but in the Being in promiscuity. The perception of the world is formed in the world, the test for truth takes place in Being. (1968, 253)

When Merleau-Ponty says that the perception of the world is formed in the world he means that the reversibility of the sensible and sentient discovered within the domain of the human body, for example in the act of touching oneself, can be extended upon the sensible itself. However, in words of Mark N. Hansen “it is not because touch (or vision) produces itself in a body that this latter belongs to the world; rather, it is because sensation belongs to the world that there are (can be) such things as bodies. For Merleau-Ponty, the body is not that which constitutes the sensory world (as it is for Husserl); rather, the body is a sensible manifestation of the world’s “sensation.” (2005, 248)

Within the flesh of the world sensibility assumes different form. The body is a particular instance of divergence of the sensible. The sentient body is manifestation

of the process imbedded in the flesh. Sentient and sensibility are not binary opposites, but a momentary manifestation of flesh.

In another instance Merleau-Ponty very clearly circumscribes a polar unity of body and mind by projecting his further research: “*Define* the mind as the *other side* of the body – We have not idea of a mind that would not be *doubled* with a body, that would not be established on this ground” (1968, 259) And then he carry is on, by explaining in detail what he means by “other side” using expressions that confirm a process, and fluidity between both states, which cannot be taken as final objectivity:

The ‘other side’ means that body, inasmuch as it has this other side, is not describable in *objective* terms, in terms of the in itself – that this other side is really the other side of the body, *overflows* into it (*Ueberschreiten*), encroached upon it, is hidden in it – and at the same time needs it, terminates in it, is anchored in it. There is a body of the mind, and a mind of the body and a chiasm between them. (1968, 259)

It is in the context of this distinction between dualism and polarism distinction where, according to Ames, lays one of the most significant implications as far as the body - mind relationship is concerned. Taking Plato as a representative of the Western tradition, he indicates how the dualistic relationship between the *psyche* and the *soma*, analogous to his form/particular distinction, is plagued with problems in explaining their interaction. It is this problem that marks the rest of the Western philosophical tradition up to this day. In the polar metaphysics of the classical Chinese tradition, however, “the correlative relationship between the psychical and the somatic militated against the emergence of mind/body problem.” (1993, 163) And, in a similar fashion to expressed earlier by Thomas Kasulis, Roger Amis adds poignantly: “It was not that the Chinese thinkers were able to “reconcile” this dichotomy; rather, it did not arise.” (*ibid*)

Lastly, it should be remembered, however, that in traditional Southeast Asian philosophies an ethical sense would often have precedence over ontological or epistemological considerations. This approach marks a difference of paradigm between Eastern and Western philosophies, which has a particular bearing on the understanding of the relational nature of the human being as body-mind complex.

3.2 Non-Material Body in Japan

There is continuity between the traditional notions of the body-mind, theorised within Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism and contemporary theories of Japanese philosophers such as Yuasa Yasuo, Ichikwa Hiroshi and Nagatomo Shigenori. Certain linguistic structures such *kokoro*, *ma*, and *ki-energy* which have traditionally framed religious, philosophical and art discourse of Japan still coexist along the phenomenological concept of “lived body”, “attunement”. Therefore it is important to underpin an analysis of Japanese body-mind theory by brief presentation of the key traditional concepts that explain within a wider cultural context specificity of Japanese approach to body and its continuity with nature and therefore also how the body is lived and presented in Butoh dance styles. The significant characteristic of all selected notions, i.e. *kokoro*, *ma*, and *ki-energy* is that they all convey in their own way an idea of connectivity, resonance, and integration between body and mind, and body-mind complex and sensuous world. They also retain a sense of transformation of the human subject, allowing her to embed herself in the dimension of intercorporeality.

3.2.1 Kokoro

The Japanese word *kokoro* (kanji character 心) is commonly translated into English as meaning both “mind” and “heart” or as a compound noun ‘mind-heart’.

It is a concept that does not have an equivalent in Western philosophy, although there were attempts to locate it within the semantic field of traditional metaphysics. Thomas Kasulis explains that scholars associated the term *kokoro* with the ancient Greek ‘*psyche*’, the Latin ‘*anima*’ and the German ‘*Geist*’. However, in *Shinto the Way Home* (2004) Kasulis warns that these are only approximations of and not equivalent to *kokoro*.⁵⁶ The main qualification is “that the Western terms have traditionally been used in contrast to materiality or to the body (the somatic). ... By contrast *Shinto* typically considers the material (which includes the somatic) as interdependent with and inseparable from the spiritual (or even psychological). So it is misleading to think of *kokoro* as equivalent to “heart and mind” if this equivalence limits *kokoro* to the psycho-spiritual or to the affective-intellectual, thereby excluding the somatic and physical.” (2004, 24).

⁵⁶ Thomas P. Kasulis, *Shinto. The Way Home* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004).

These remarks remind us that we need to be very careful not to be too hasty to apply Western patterns of thought, especially that our traditional, conceptual framework is marked by body/mind and spirit/matter dualisms.

Describing *kokoro* in positive terms, while bringing it closer to the idiom of the English speaking reader, Kasulis says:

If one has to try to find a single English translation, the “mindful heart” might be a bit closer the mark – especially if we remember that the mindful heart is not separate from the body. Because the mindful heart is an interdependent complex of responsiveness, *kokoro* is cognition with affect, affect with cognition. It is, in this respect, both subjective and objective. To experience the extraordinary, one has to be open to being affectively touched by the phenomenon and its *tama* (spirit)... In short: *kokoro* suggests an affectively charged cognitivity. Thinking and feeling occur together in the person’s engagement with the awe-inspiring [*phenomenon*].⁵⁷(2004, 25)

In the context of the *Shinto* beliefs, where it has originated “*kokoro* is not simply a centre of responsiveness within the person”, rather, it has an ontological status as it is predicated on sentient and insentient beings. (2004: 25) The words of Mottori Norinaga, (1730-1801), a scholar of ancient Japanese classics, and renowned representative of the Japanese school of thought called “native studies”, promoting a revival of aboriginal beliefs in the Edo period (XVII until the mid-XIX century) support this claim. In his *Shinto* inspired aesthetic he emphasised that “the ancient Japanese spoke of *kokoro* as more than a human quality: There is also *kokoro* in things (*mono no kokoro*) and in word-events (*koto no kokoro*).” (Kasulis 1993, 309) Atsushi Takneouchi’s style of *Jinen* Butoh, promoting movement awareness work in nature sites, often makes recourse to our *kokoro*, as way to allow a deep resonance between our body-mind and the surrounding living landscape. Takenouchi urges his student to listen with their heart-mind to the trees or rocks that inhabit the space where the workshop takes place.

⁵⁷ My alternative; in the original an author used the word ‘tree’, giving an example of a person’s encounter with the a magnificent, ancient tree. However, the same state of heart-mind can be aroused by a waterfall, a rock, light reflection in a drop of dew etc. Therefore, I believe that my substitution is justified, and gives the above statement a more expansive field of reference.

This view finds its expression in contemporary Japanese landscape gardening, which although practiced within the Zen tradition, is an instance of the interpenetrating and mutual exchange between *Shinto* and Zen Buddhism. Masuno Shunmyo, a Creator of the “Zen-inspired” dry landscape garden at the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Ottawa, Canada called *Wakei No Niwa*, states:

Everything that exists has *kokoro* (i.e. some sense of awareness): there is rock *kokoro*, and there is a tree *kokoro*. In whatever form it exists, *kokoro* is to be respected. One must arrange the rocks or plants to express their own *kokoro*, and also arrange the rocks and plants in such a way as to express one’s own philosophy and understanding. There is a mutuality of influence and effect. To do this is extremely difficult, for it demands a meeting of *kokoro* with *kokoro* (after Carter 2008, 6)

Expanding on the ontological aspects of *kokoro* Kasulis indicates a ‘connectedness’ or spatial kind of responsiveness as its distinctive features. He states:

The traditional understanding of *kokoro* [...] regards it as a resonant responsiveness *within the overlap* between the world and the person. The *kokoro*’s response is an engagement arising from being among things. Whereas it is certainly possible [...] to distinguish the world and the person as two independent entities, *Shinto* instead emphasises that world and the person as interdependent poles within a single field of resonance. (2004, 25)

An interpretation of *kokoro* as a field of resonance which connects a human being with the world, reveal that there is an intrinsic link between what we call in the West, emotional, or even unconscious aspect of our being and the somatic actions. Allowing oneself to give up our utilitarian projections to which we subject surrounding object and to connect with their *kokoro*, can become a vehicle to attain our pre-reflective mode of awareness.

Erick Sherlock, the author of the book *Kokoro as Ecological Insight: The Concept of Heart in Japanese Literature* (1984) captures the essence of *kokoro* in relation to poetic expression by underscoring a certain pre-reflective mode of awareness, understood as a state to be attained wherein the subject–object dualism is

not manifest. He says, “The aesthetics of *kokoro* points consistently to a method of attaining a state of awareness where the dichotomy of subject and object have not yet arisen, and of the possibility to bring that perspective back into the world of experience”. (Sherlock 1984, 117)

3.2.2 Felt Inter-Resonance

The notion of *kokoro* can be productively juxtaposed with another notion derived from the tradition of Japanese sitting mediation, called *zazen*. What Nagatomo renders into English as felt inter-resonance in Japanese is called *kanno doko*. It is made up of four characters, *kan* (feeling) + *no* (response) + *do* (paths) + *ko* (to intersect). Traditionally, within Zen Buddhism the term describes the state of awareness achieved by the *zazen* mediator after long period of consistent practice. It is an experience that is called *satori* or awakening. The felt inter-resonance corresponds with “a lived feeling within mediator’s body-image revealing that his/her inner world envelops and extends to the entire space, the world of shaped things, with intrinsic qualities of this lived feeling fulfilling the gap between them” (1992:149) It is interesting to notice that although there indication of the almost mystic unity with the world, there still a residue of separation, a gap which needs to fulfilled by the ‘quality of the lived feeling.’ Would it not therefore suggest that a sense of connection, does not mean actually a union. The identity remains, yet there is a matter of the, let say attitude or intention of the subject. From the epistemic perspective the field of the felt inter-resonance emerges only as result of active engagement of the subject. As such it has an ethical aspect to it and has an invigorating effect on the subject as well as on the sensible world. Resonance brings about carrying reciprocity. Nagatomo describes this relation in following words:

When the consummate state of meditation firmly established, an ‘inter resonance’ emerges in the invigorating lives between the meditator and the shaped things of the natural world. The meditator qua body is attuned to the natural world through a complete consummation of the somatic appropriation. Once this inert-resonance is achieved, the shaped things, either sentient of insentient, begin to present themselves to samadhic awareness as being intimate with the being of the meditator (1992:150)

Above passage, in a sense, could be a description of the experienced Butoh practitioner. Her or his awareness, as result of the somatic appropriation, is immersed

in the field of inter-resonance. Sentient and insentient entities contribute to this field. Dancer is attuned with them and emerges invigorated. The body is a starting point. The arrival point is enhanced somatic awareness in the felt sense of inter-resonance.

3.3 *Ma* – a world in-between⁵⁸

Ma (間) is a complex concept with many facets and layers and central to Japanese perception of relations, space and time. Essentially it designates the “interval” between two or more spatial or temporal things and events. Richard B. Pilgrim, author of the work already referred to, “*Intervals ("Ma") in Space and Time*” (1986) announces that it carries meanings such as gap, opening, space between, time between and so forth⁵⁹. Arata Isozaki, a contemporary architect and curator of a seminal exhibition organised in Paris and New York in 1979 titled “*MA: Space-Time in Japan*” explains that “apart from space, *ma* is applied to the discussion of time as well, revealing that in Japan there was ‘not even a distinction between space and time like in modern Western thought’ (2009, 161). In Japan, these two concepts are blended together. Time goes across space, creating folds in it. This particular concept of time and space is expressed in Japanese by the single word ‘*ma*’ (間).

Richard Pilgrim also notes that *ma* means “among”. This is a crucial observation in the way the Japanese define a human being. He explains: “In the compound *ningen* (“human being”) [...] *ma* (here read ‘*gen*’) implies that persons (*nin*, *hito*) stand within, among or in relationship to others. As such the word *ma* clearly begins to take on a relational meaning, a dynamic sense of standing in, with,

⁵⁸ The notion of *Ma* was introduced to contemporary western audiences by Isozaki in his seminal exhibition “*Ma’: Space-Time in Japan*” in Paris and New York. In the catalogue accompanying this exhibition held in 1979 in the Museum of Decorative Arts in Paris and at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum in New York City, Isozaki expounds the complex fabric of significations of this notion as well as various manifestations of *Ma* in art and ritual practice as an experiential phenomenon. This exhibition was also significant from the perspective of Butoh dance as it was during the opening in Paris that key figures of Butoh dance presented their art. Isozaki says, “There, at the Festival d’automne in Paris, dancers Yoko Ashikawa and Min Tanaka and actress Kayoko Shiraishi performed, directed by Tadashi Suzuki, and choreographed by Tatsumi Hijikata, who also danced. [...]. In hindsight, they were a spectacular cast but at the time they were making their overseas debuts. I thought of these works of drama and music born in the cracks of the Japanese city as having emerged out of darkness. I wanted to create a stage wrapped in such darkness”. Arata Isozaki and Ken Tadashi Oshima, *Arata Isozaki* (London & New York: Phaidon Press Limited, 2009).

⁵⁹ Pilgrim, Richard B. “Intervals ("Ma") in Space and Time: Foundations for a Religios-Aesthetic Paradigm in Japan.” *History of Religions* (The University of Chicago Press) 25, no. 3 (Feb 1986), p. 255.

among or between. Related to this, it also carries an *experiential* connotation since to be among people is to interact in some dynamic way.”⁶⁰ (1986, 256; *my italics*)

The notion of a human being described in terms of its relational character, of its positioning in relation to others, human beings as well as other sentient and non-sentient beings is of great consequence for Japanese culture and its anti-anthropocentric stance. The reflection of this view is very clear in the discourse and practice of Butoh dance. The very structure of the Japanese language suggests intercorporeality as a primordial mode of existence of the human being.

This experiential aspect of *ma* becomes one of the explanatory perspectives that Richard Pilgrim adopts in his description of *ma*. *Ma* is at the same time ‘something’, an object within objectively described reality. But it also signifies particular, subjective modes of experience. He acknowledges that both aspects are important, but it is the latter one, by which “*ma* becomes a religio-aesthetic paradigm and brings about a collapse of a distinctive (objective) world, and even of time and space itself.” (1986, 256) Elaborating further on the experiential aspect of *ma* with its ability to collapse space and time as two distinct and abstract objects, he goes on to say that it can only happen in a particular mode of experience that ‘empties’ the objective /subjective world(s). I will quote at length:

Only in aesthetic, immediate, relational experience can space be perceived as identical with the events or phenomena occurring in it. Therefore although *ma* may be objectively located as intervals in space and time, ultimately it transcends this and expresses a deeper level. Indeed, it takes us to a boundary situation at the edge of thinking and the edge of all processes of locating things by naming and distinguishing. (*ibid.*)

Another significant phenomenon that came to be associated with *ma* while evoking the event in which *kami* (spirits in Shinto understanding) descended into the space-time is *utsuroi*, which in the “‘*Ma*’: *Space-Time in Japan*” catalogue has been

⁶⁰ A brief remark about the nature of Japanese language; because the writing was introduced into Japan from China, there are at least two readings of each character: one called the *ON* reading which is the Japanese pronunciation of the Chinese words, the other the *KUN* reading which is traditionally Japanese. In the above case the character (間) is pronounced in *KUN*, in traditional Japanese, as “*ma*” or sometimes when used in compound phrases as “*aida*”. “*Gen*” on the other hand, is the *ON* reading of Chinese origin, and used in the word *Ningen* (人間) meaning “human being”.

described as “*Ma* - the way to sense the moment of movement.”(Isozaki 1979 after Isozaki and Oshima 2009, 160) Isozaki explains, “originally the word ‘*utsuroi*’ meant the exact moment when the *kami* spirit entered into and occupied a vacant space, (for example, the Japanese at one time believed that round stones were hollow and were occupied by *kami*). Later it came to signify the moment when the shadow of the spirit emerged from the void. This sense of the *kami*’s sudden appearance, which is anchored deep in the Japanese soul, gave birth to the idea of *utsuroi*, the moment when nature is transformed, the passage from one state to another.” (2009, 159) The focus on transformation and its precondition: being able to sense the moment of movement, that is an attunement with these fleeting moments within which, as Zen master Dōgen (1200-53) described, all reality is totally present in that space/time, is of utmost significance in every traditional art of Japan. This is *Ma* understood as a ‘way of sensing’ an ‘expectant stillness’. *Utsuroi* implies, in the words of Richard Pilgrim “a particular mode of experience or sensitivity, one that is highly attuned to the immediacy of sensual experience; one that can, for example, hear the faint sounds of *kami* presence (*otozureru*).” (1986, 270) This mode of sensitivity originated in the context of Shinto rituals, where it can be related to a particular mode of waiting for the signs (*kehai*) of *kami*. It is an expectant, receptive and sensitive openness which, according to Okamoto Kenji, an assistant chief priest of Atsuta Shrine in Nagoya, distinguishes *Shinto* as a religion of “waiting for, receiving, and attending to the presence of *kami* rather than an active seeking or petitioning that presence and its benefits.”⁶¹ Yoshito Ohno regards this attitude as essential to Butoh and calls it “the patience of not starting.” (Frleigh 2006, 114)

I think that Richard Pilgrim captures the essence of this mode by simultaneously pointing to the particular aspects characteristic of a subject that has achieved body-mind unity. He says, “It is a mode of sensitivity that opens the self to the depth of the moment through a disciplined receptivity and sensual awareness.” (1986, 270) It is this last qualification “through a disciplined receptivity and sensual awareness” that underlies the practical aspects of and sensitivity to the issue of embodiment that are of paramount importance, if the event of the *kami* descent is to be witnessed. It suggests that both receptivity and sensual awareness can reach a

⁶¹ A private interview with Richard Pilgrim (Nagoya, September 1983) after Richard B. Pilgrim, “Intervals (“*Ma*”) in Space and Time: Foundations for a Religios-Aesthetic Paradigm in Japan,” *History of Religions* (The University of Chicago Press) 25, no. 3 (Feb 1986): 270.

higher degree through a discipline, or to be more accurate, a cultivation that transforms body and mind, which is called in Japanese *shugyō*.

Returning to the sense of *ma* expounded through the idea of *utsuroi and* translated by Isozaki as “the way to sense the moment of movement” it points “to the fullness of the present moment in its intuitive, aesthetic immediacy as the locus of living reality.”(1986, 270) This is the experience that came to define the ancient Japanese poetic awareness of time/space collapsed into the present moment and is present today not only in the classical arts of Japan, for example Noh theatre, but also as an essential aspect of the contemporary art of Butoh dance.

3.4 Ki-energy

The concept of *Ki*-energy is another of the key concepts for understanding the Japanese view of the relationship both within the body-mind complex and between the embodied person and the external world. Its presence has been marked throughout the history of Chinese philosophy and it found its elaboration in Daoism, Confucianism and Buddhism alike where it has influenced as much cosmological discourse, as the self-cultivation practices. Consequently, the concept of *ki* is fundamentally important to the view of the body held by traditional Chinese and Japanese medicine as well as for both martial and performing arts.⁶²

The term *Ki* (Jap, 氣) is a Japanese translation of the Chinese word transcribed either as *ch'i* or *qi* and translated into English in various ways as ‘vital energy’, ‘spirit’, ‘ether’, ‘physical force’, ‘bio-energy’ or ‘physical energy’. It bears a certain resemblance to the concept of *prana* in Indian philosophy and *pneuma* in Greek philosophy, although, as with the notion of *kokoro*, it should be remembered that it contains both psychological and physical aspects. In the context of Yosuo Yuasa’s book *The Body, Self-Cultivation and Ki-Energy* (1993), which is the main point of reference in this section, *ki* is precisely rendered as ‘psychophysical energy’.

According to cosmological interpretation, *ki* is a life force that operates on both the macrocosmic plane of the universe and the microcosmic plane of the human being. It is in continuous flow within both of those realms as well as between them,

⁶² For an extensive presentation of the theory of *ki* energy, its application in acupuncture and also in martial arts, and the current state of the empirical research in the field, the reader should refer to the work of Yuasa Yosuo, *The Body, Self-Cultivation and Ki-Energy* (1993). He also elaborates this theme in: Yosuo Yuasa, *Overcoming Modernity. Synchronicity and Image-Thinking*, trans. Shigenori Nagatomo and John W. M. Krummel (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008).

traversing the complexes of the human body-mind and the spirit-matter of the universe.⁶³

The above formulation of *ki* stemming from Chinese antiquity requires further elaboration. The notion of *ki* poses difficulties for a Western theoretical framework still predominantly marked by a dualistic stance and methodological paradigm varying from that represented by Eastern philosophy. Yuasa acknowledges difficulties that describes the concept and phenomenon of *ki*-energy in the following words:

[T]he substance of the *ki*-energy is not yet known. It is the flow of a certain energy circulating in the living body, unique to living organisms. ... [T]he flow of *ki*, when it is seen psychologically, is perceived in the circuit of coenesthesia ..., as a self-apprehending sensation of one's own body under special circumstances. ... When it is viewed physiologically, it is detected on the skin. ... Therefore, the *ki*-energy is both psychological and physiological. ... [I]ts substance lies in the region of the psychologically unconscious and physiologically invisible. (Yuasa 1993, 116-117)

Ki-energy has a complex 'topography', traversing what, according to the dualistic Western paradigm, is regarded as the very distinct order of a human being's body-mind structure. But in this characteristic lies its specificity. *Ki* pervades nature and connects the body to nature. Yuasa underlines the fact that Eastern philosophy and medicine have from the outset:

understood the body as open system connected to the external world. In so doing it has conceived that, although undetectable by sensory perception, there is an exchange of life-energy of some sort between the body and the external world, that is, there is an absorption and release of *ki* between them.⁶⁴ (1993, 106-107)

⁶³ In passing, I note that the notions of yin and yang, so readily associated with Daoism, designate the aspects of *ki*-energy, as its receptive and active states.

⁶⁴ Thomas Kasulis informs us that both in China and Japan there was a strict taboo against dissection of the human body, and although there was a certain period when it was practiced, it was discontinued. As a result both civilisations thought about human being in terms of the whole mind-body complex: "When a person dies, the internal relationships among the mind and the body must be severed; so the remaining remnant, the body, could no longer be the same". (Kasulis: 1993: 305) Therefore, the Chinese and Japanese carried out their medical research on living subjects, living mind-body complexes. Given the

3.4.1 *Ki* and intercorporeality

The above view has a fundamental importance for conceptions of intercorporeality as it suggests a process similar to reversibility that enlivens intercorporeal relationships within the element of Flesh. *Ki*-energy, while circulating in the interior of the body is connected through the distal points (also called “well acu-points”) to the flow of *ki* in the outer world. Yuasa makes a significant comment on this aspect of *ki*:

We take the sensation of our own bodies [...] individually as “I”, but this “I” intermingles with the outer world through the boundary of the skin. ... The skin is a field making unique contact with the material world, within which an interchange takes place through the flow of *ki* between psychological and physiological functions, that is, between the mind and the body. (1993: 108)

Chinese and Japanese medicine and philosophy maintain that *ki* connects the microcosm of “myself” with the macrocosm of the world “outside of the skin”. It is a medium of the latent, but reciprocal relation of exchange between those two orders transcending the mind-matter dichotomy of the Cartesian ontology.

It has also further consequences for the understanding of the external world, the world of nature. If the existence of *ki* life energy is accepted, in line with the ontological stand of Chinese and Japanese philosophies⁶⁵, then an exchange on the unconscious level between macrocosm and microcosm occurs vis-à-vis *ki*-energy. In turn our understanding of the world of nature, filled with *ki*, cannot be simply defined as a world of matter, but instead as “a living order of vital nature”. Yuasa remarks that this ancient Eastern view “has understood the relationship between human beings and the world from an *ecological* perspective, and the body has been taken as the field [Jap. *ba*] where this relationship is actually lived and positivistically known. To characterise this in another way, a human being [...] is a being incapable of living in isolation. A human being is a passive-active being which is made to live by nature.”(1987,109) I think it is necessary to briefly discuss

historical context and resulting paradigm of acupuncture, it is no surprising that it is particularly effective in managing pain. As Kasulis poignantly observes “Corpses do not feel pain; only living mind-body complexes do.” (Kasulis: 1993: 305)

⁶⁵ Yosuo Yuasa presents an ample body of empirical experiments aiming to present the *ki*-energy theory as compatible with the western scientific, methodological paradigm in his book, although ultimately endorsing a different ontological view. See: Part III, Chapters 5 and 6, pp 131-174

Yuasa's last statement, which otherwise might appear as too apodictic and perhaps somewhat simplistic. What Yuasa seems to imply by saying that "a human being is an active-passive being incapable of living in isolation" and "made to live by nature" is that Eastern philosophy underscored relationality as a major principle of being human, just as other beings exist in the world. Nature in this context, is not conceived as an absolutely determining factor, but is meant as anonymous network, within which the human being is integrated. Hence, Yuasa's earlier reference to ecological perspective.⁶⁶ This thought resonates with the ideas of contemporary eco-phenomenology as presented in the Chapter II.

Shigenori Nagatomo, a commentator of Yuasa's work, reiterates the view of his distinguished colleague by saying: "According to acupuncture medicine, an invisible psychophysical *ki*-energy circulates within the interior of the body, while at the same time intermingling with the *ki*-energy pervasively present in the environment including that of other persons." (1993, XII) This last subtle remark about the inclusion of "other persons" in the circle of exchange of *ki* is significant. It underscores and draws a logical conclusion from Yuasa's insistence on the importance of *ki*-energy. Even more poignantly Nagatomo points out that "Yuasa's study on *ki*-energy suggests that our research on intersubjectivity must first investigate the *ki*-energy field of *intercorporeality*, because if there is an emission of as well as a detection of *ki*-energy both in the interior and the exterior of "own's own body," the field of *ki*-energy is more important and primary than the field of intersubjectivity that may be established within the confines of *ego cogito*." (1993, 195n.18)

Nagatomo uses a particular expression in above passage, namely 'ki-energy filed of intercorporeality.' It merits a closer reading as it indicates an overlap and potential of synergy between Merleau-Ponty's ontology wherein intercorporeality underpins our relations with other sensible things as well as intersubjective relations. In *Phenomenology of Perception* when admittedly he was still using a different set of concepts in comparison to his ontology of flesh, Merleau-Ponty writes about subject-object dialog:

⁶⁶ Yuasa examines the relationship between ancient Eastern thought and contemporary Western science in depth in his last work: *Overcoming Modernity. Synchronicity and Image-Thinking*, trans. Shigenori Nagatomo and John W. M. Krummel (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008).

The normal subject penetrates into the object by perception, assimilating its structure into his substance, and through this body the object directly regulates its movement. This subject-object dialog, this drawing together, by the subject, of the [primary] meaning diffused through the object, and by the object, of the subject's [bodily] intentions – a process which is physiognomic perception – arranges round the subject a [primary] world which speaks to him of himself, and gives his own thoughts their place in the world. (1962, 152-153)

It is important not to interpret “penetration” and “assimilation” in the physical terms for we would fall into trap of empirical model and miss the opportunity to take advantage of middle term – *ki*-energy which has been earlier defined as an invisible energy of psycho-physical nature. It should also be remembered that psycho-physical nature is not a composite of both realms but rather, in correspondence with Merleau-Ponty's description of flesh, an element that precedes such a distinction. The context of dialog or reciprocity should be considered as decisive. From this angle an operation of an invisible energy, which is subtler than physical, and which also could be attributed to the ‘diffusion’ of the primary meaning spreading from the subject.

Nagatomo suggests that *ki*-energy with its status of the third term of psycho-physical nature could lead us to affirmation that there should be a mutual interfusion of this energy between the subject and the object as a condition for reciprocity to take place. Consequently he also postulates that there must be an emanation or projection and reception of *ki*-energy issued respectively from the living bodies involved in the ‘dialog’. Eventually he advances his theory towards a scenario where the mutual interfusion of *ki*-energies emanated respectively from the each of the multiply lived bodies forms “out in the open a field of what may be called an intercorporeality.” (2009, 234) He clarifies that “the term ‘inter’ in ‘intercorporeality’ is used here to designate a sense of ‘among’ and so acknowledges the plurality of lived bodies in the formation of this field, while term ‘corporeality’ is used to acknowledge the source of emanating energies. The field of ‘intercorporeality’ indicates a temporary interfusion of *ki*-energies, confluenced together when plural lived bodies come together.” (2009, 234)

I must add here that Nagatomo utilises also Merleau-Ponty's concept of “intentional arc” as a correlative of *ki*-energy in Japanese thought. Merleau-Ponty proposed this concept in order to give account of an overarching function of the

human being that integrates consciousness with operational intentionality of the lived body. In Merleau-Ponty words:

The life of consciousness – cognitive life, the life of desire of perceptual life – is subtended by an ‘intentional arc’ which projects round about us our past, our future, our human setting, our physical, ideological and moral situation. [...] It is this intentional arc which brings about the unity of the senses, of intelligence, of sensibility and motility.” (1962, 157) Nagatomo postulates *ki*-energy as medium that obtains between living bodies that affects a formation of an intentional arc, or in case of a relation between persons “a bilateral intentional arc.” (2009, 232)

Nagatomo, therefore insists that “the bilateral ‘intentional arc’ is realized in this field of intercorporeality qua the *ki*-energies, which in turn is the precondition for the mutual interfusion of invisible *ki*-energies to occur.” (*ibid.*) What this suggests to the issue of establishing a ground for intersubjectivity is that “neither the self nor the other can exist independently from each other, because if our analysis of the field of intercorporeality is correct, it implies that the other and the self emerge concurrently along with the interfusion of the invisible *ki*-energy.” (234) We should dwell on this statement, as at first it may appear as lacking foundation. It is plausible that the interfusion of the invisible *ki*-energy emanating from living bodies brings about an emergence of particular relationship between two subjects – evokes a field of intercorporeality. But to claim that the self and the other cannot exist interdependent from each other seems to be a much stronger claim. First, it could be pointed out, and it would be the one aspect of intercorporeality in Merleau-Pontian sense, as well as within ecological perspective of both traditional Japanese Shinto and Buddhism as well current phenomenological approaches, that we are never dissociated from other entities. We can hardly imagine an environment which would be lacking entirely in other living beings – even if they were insects, they would still contribute to emergence of the particular sense of self.

Secondly, this argument has roots in Buddhist doctrine of dependent co-arising, which Nagatomo, for some reason fails to evoke. In its classic definition it appears in early Buddhist texts as “Because this arises, that arises; because this ceases, that ceases.” Dependent co-arising is a theory of causation but it must be stressed that this doctrine does not endorse a mechanistic causal theory. As editors of *Merleau-Ponty and Buddhism* state “the theory of dependent co-arising demonstrates the non-identity of identity in the sense that an entity is at all times already a matrix

of diverse causes and conditions that contribute to the existence of a current event.” (2009, 4) Therefore Nagatomo can state that neither the self nor the other can exist independently from each other as these particular entities. Within an intercorporeal field a unique sense of self is evoked at a particular time. When a self is perceived as a body-mind existing in the *ki*-energy field of intercorporeality “it can be identified as neither entirely active nor solely passive; it relates in a chiasmatic relationship with other ‘bodyminds’ and to the cosmos as a whole.” (2009,5)

Another implication of recognizing the mutually emanative interfusion of *ki*-energies is that “there is no one-sided view of taking the one as active and other as passive in the dialog. In fact, the fixed active-passive scheme does not arise in the bilateral “intentional arc” or in the field of intercorporeality. Rather, two entities entering into this relation of mutual interfusion must be characterised by an interchangeability; the concept of bilaterality presupposes that that which engages can turn into that which is engaged, and vice versa.” (2009, 234) The last mention of interchangeability recalls the notion of reversibility which is a core function that defines flesh in Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of flesh. It has to be qualified, however, that Merleau-Ponty’s concept of reversibility does not denote complete interchangeability in the ontological sense, although a sense of interchangeability of active-passive roles could be accepted.

Lastly we must recognise the preconscious status of the field of intercorporeality and difficulties of accessing this level of interaction. Nagatomo contends “reflective consciousness associated with the allegedly transparent consciousness is not useful in bringing this preconscious operation into full awareness.”(*ibid.*) Yet it does not mean that the access is impossible. This would negate the whole theory, which precisely is based on experiential evidence, derived from Eastern medicine, martial arts, meditation practices, and Japanese performing arts such as Noh theatre and Butoh dance. Nagatomo asserts that access to the field of intercorporeality, which occurs “in the depths of the lived body [...] denoting regions of [...] kinesthesia and somaesthetics, emotional circuit, and the unconscious” requires an awareness that occurs when the level of activity of the allegedly transparent consciousness is lowered, that is, when the consciousness is totally relaxed. (2009, 234) Nagatomo’s understanding of the function of *ki*-energy has practical implications and could enhance the understanding of interpersonal

relationships, by acknowledging and drawing directly from the dimension of intercorporeality.

3.5 Attunement through the body

Based on his interpretation of *ki*-energy and taking as his point of reference the effects of meditation practices of Japanese Zen Buddhism Nagatomo Shigenori formulated his own theory called “attunement theory” which he expressed in *Attunement Through the Body* (1992) in a methodical way.

Shigenori Nagatomo developed his theory of attunement against the background of his Japanese predecessors Ichikawa, Yuasa and Dogen, whose theories he comprehensively presented in the first two parts of his book. As we witnessed with respect to Merleau-Ponty in the preceding sections of this chapter, he acknowledges that the concepts of other Western philosophers, notably Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Henri Bergson, Max Scheller have inspired many aspects of his theory. According to Nagatomo’s tentative definition “the theory of attunement purports to articulate the mode of engagement that obtains actionally as well as epistemologically between a person and his/her ambience.” (1992, 179) He understands, by the notion of person, an entity of psycho-physical integration and by “the leaving ambience” the totality of shaped things, either animate or inanimate, including the person with ‘*anima*’. Here, a commentator on Nagatomo’s theory, Tom Downey, points out that the above formulation of “the living ambience” is ambiguous. The first sense seems to assert “the relationship between a personal body and the external ambience”, whilst the second presents the ambience as a “plenitude out of which the person arises”, in which, consequently “the ambience loses the sense of externality.” Nagatomo acknowledges this ambiguity and asserts that it is this second position that his theory strives towards, although in the preliminary stage of its introduction he takes the first alternative as his point of departure. Interestingly this strategy of recognising and focusing on the epistemological dimension of attunement through the body, thanks to the shift of perspective in later stages reveals a wider, ontological dimension of the same phenomena and reminds us of the development of Merleau-Ponty’s ideas from the notion of the lived body to the notion of flesh. Surely then, these two aspects have a particularly significant bearing on the theory of attunement. The first one stresses the more active part of the subject in its integration with the external world, which would possibly be more acceptable

within the Western philosophical tradition. The second, however, is more ‘revolutionary’ in its exposure of the ‘intertwining’ and not so clear in terms of the passive-active characteristic of the relationship of the personal body with the ambiance. Both these aspects connect with Merleau-Ponty’s themes of the mature thought (1960, 1968) and the appropriation of his ideas by the ecological phenomenology of David Abram (Abram, 1996).

Another aspect of the preliminary formulation of the theory of attunement stresses the notion of engagement which is used to describe “an actional”, which we could call a practical, as well as an “epistemological orientation of the person toward an external and an internal world” (1992, 179). The practical or ‘actional’ aspect of engagement can take the form of a person engaging with his or her living ambiance or the manner through which that ambiance engages the person and “depends upon the lived experience of his/her mind and body”. By underlining this last condition Nagatomo hopes that the theory of attunement advanced as an epistemological paradigm might serve as an alternative to body-mind dualism and be viewed as a metaphysical theory. Such a formulation of the theory of attunement seems to stand in opposition to the Western tradition, in which the parameters of knowledge are usually attributed to either the psychical aspects of a person or the physical aspects in an external world. In either case, however, the somatic aspects of an epistemic subject considered beyond alternatives of idealism and empiricism have been disregarded. Ultimately, the above acute distinction, on epistemological and metaphysical grounds, produces the split of the self as follows: “the theoretical or the intellectual always runs ahead, leaving the practical behind, the praxis which inevitably involves a bodily engagement and bodily modification such as emotions, desires and passions” (1992, 181). Hence the theory of attunement proposes an understanding of the theoretical, the practical, the actional and the epistemological if not as a given unity, then at least as an attainable unity. In other words, Nagatomo states that the provisional dualism of ego-consciousness, or everyday consciousness as we could call it, can in the process of the somatic practice of meditation be transformed into the non-dualistic state of an extraordinary, i.e. samadic awareness.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ At this stage suffice to say there is an ambivalent affinity between the meditative state described by Nagatomo, and conceptually elaborated by Ichikawa (*The body as Spirit*, 1975) and the state of the Butoh dancer. In principle, as Sandra Fraleigh and Thomah Nakamura claim, they occupy extreme positions in a context of degree of unity between the body and the spirit (2006: 50). On the other hand, paradoxically, they would appear to share similar characteristics with respect to the

This last concept expresses the state of perfect psychosomatic integration, in which not only the dualism of the body and the mind but also of the object and the subject is overcome as defined by the mediaeval Zen master Dogen. The phenomenon of somatic transformation, achieved in the process of habit formation that pertains to the body, leads to the presupposition that it is the human body which “embodies a ground or a source of intelligibility.”(1992, 183) This claim in the context of the theory of attunement accepts the existence of a “somatic knowledge” that is conceived as primary and therefore foundational for cognitive knowledge. Nagatomo qualifies this priority by putting it on a preontological level, if by ontology we understand “the region arising from “thinkability” in a Parmenidic sense, or from an “understanding” (*Verstand*) in Heidegger’s sense made explicit in *Being and Time*. (1992, 183) On the other hand, Nagatomo ventures, this priority might be termed ontological, under the condition that it will be ontology in a more rigorous sense. It is ontology that attends to the prereflective dimension of the personal life and such ontology, with its claim to priority over the epistemological perspective of the egological subject, is an investigation into a somatic region.

The term attunement in the context of this theory, as previously stated, describes the nature of bilateral engagement between the personal body and its living ambiance that is both epistemological and actional in character. The result obtained through the various degrees of attunement has been termed as somatic knowledge by Nagatomo. Its meaning pertains to the fact that it is achieved through the body rather than as a result of intellectual knowledge about the body. It also differs from cognitive or intellectual knowledge in that it does not objectify the object in its immediate, everyday occurrence. Instead it operates on the principle of “feeling-judgement” that does not require the circumscribing of its object in order to act. Having mentioned the bilaterality of attunement, it is crucial to emphasise the experiential momentum that manifests itself in a mode of coming-together. This process, in turn, is characterised by the constitution of its own somatic field, and consequently its own temporalisation and spatialisation, within which a nondualistic rapport with the ambiance arises. This can be achieved through the process of essential sedimentation; this signifies a process of “progressive retrogression”, via a

phenomenon of intercorporeality. This is analysed in depth in the chapter devoted to Butoh specifically.

form of meditation, in the *altus* of a personal body. The notion of progressive retrogression bears a resemblance to the phenomenological reduction of Husserl, although it could be argued that the former is more radical as it requires not only an intellectual suspension, but also a physical disengagement from the sensorial world. This is all for the sake of ‘descending’ and ‘ascending’ towards “the true body” and being in unity with its ambiance, as described by the Eihei Dogen. Nagatomo also chooses the Latin term *altus* for the simultaneous description of the depth and height of the lived experience through our body. Eventually, then, the result of a persistent somatic change is brought about. This can be denoted by the various stages of psychosomatic integration that shape the respective levels of somatic engagement with the ambiance: tensional, de-tensional and non-tensional. These three correspond respectively: to the everyday modality of a dualistic perception of the world, a transitional state of attending, via meditation, to the pre-reflective dimension of the person and the indication of a nondualistic attunement with the world, the world regained at the higher level of psychosomatic integration where there is no tension between the subject and its object, the world.

My claim is that Butoh dance, similarly to mediation traditions, when practiced with the focus on increasing somatic receptivity and kinesthetic expressivity of a dancer together produces an appropriate state of body-mind awareness (*butoh-tai*) promoting a deeper appreciation of the field of intercorporeality.

Chapter IV

Butoh: Dimensions of Intercorporeality

Introduction

When viewed from the Western perspective on performing arts, Butoh occupies a position on the borderline between modern dance, dance theatre and physical theatre. This categorisation does not, however, take account of Butoh's specificity. When performed by Japanese dancers, the layers of its specific cultural heritage inevitably comes through, and its formal aspects often make associations with traditional Japanese arts, such as Noh theatre and Kabuki. Butoh performances are often peaceful and aesthetically appealing, inducing a quasi-meditative state in the audience. And the bodies of the dancers are visualised—as stated by Ushio Amagatsu—as 'a cup filled to over-flowing, one that cannot take even one more drop of liquid' in order to help it enter 'a perfect state of balance.'⁶⁸ In the visual sphere Butoh is typified by the naked, shaved bodies of dancers painted white and moving across the stage extremely slowly in a crouching position. At the same time it preserves its uncanny style of projecting austere and ugly images of violence and death intertwined in equal measure with a quality of beauty and a sense of harmony.

However, despite its apparent geographical origin and a relatively short lineage, Butoh's cultural, artistic and philosophical influences and inspirations are neither simple nor linear but multi-layered and, at times, internally contradictory phenomena. It will be crucial to proceed with caution so as to preserve the numerous subtleties of Butoh, both in relation to its indigenous tradition and to the significantly influential European artistic and cultural models.

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Before attempting to unearth the dimension of the lived experience of intercorporeality in Butoh dance, I shall briefly outline its social, cultural and historical context. In the course of this chapter, it will be necessary to take a close look at the figure of its founder, Tatsumi Hijikata. I shall indicate the heterogeneous sources that inspired Butoh's creator in a way that avoids seeing the relationship

⁶⁸ Amagatsu Ushio as quoted in Martin A. David, 'Sankai Juku', *High Performance* 7, no 3 (1985), p. 18, after Susan Klein Blakeley, *Ankoku Butoh: The Premodern and Postmodern Influences on the Dance of Utter Darkness* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 26.

between his life and work in causal terms, while acknowledging the importance of the ‘ground soil’ that Tohoku life represented for Hijikata, nourishing his artistic ideas.⁶⁹

In the main part of this chapter I shall focus on Butoh performances in order to illustrate the aspects of current Butoh practice that are most productive for my engagement with the notion of intercorporeality. This will be Butoh as experienced by myself in the course of embodied practice and reflection as facilitated by the contemporary Butoh master Atsushi Takenouchi. In harmony with his career as a Butoh dancer, Atsushi Takenouchi promotes Butoh as a way to self-actualisation through exploration of the body, leading to a recovery of its primordial knowledge and re-establishing our attunement with the human and non-human, or—as David Abram, the author of *The Spell of the Sensuous* calls it—the ‘more-than-human’ world (1996). In light of the notion of intercorporeality Takenouchi’s practice can be understood as the development of a profound awareness of not only being-in-the-world (*In-der-Welt-sein*) in the Heideggerian sense, but also of a pre-objective specificity of being-of-the-world (*être-au-monde*) as Merleau-Ponty underlined it. It can thus be seen as an ontological basis for personal growth.⁷⁰

4.1 Socio-cultural context of Butoh

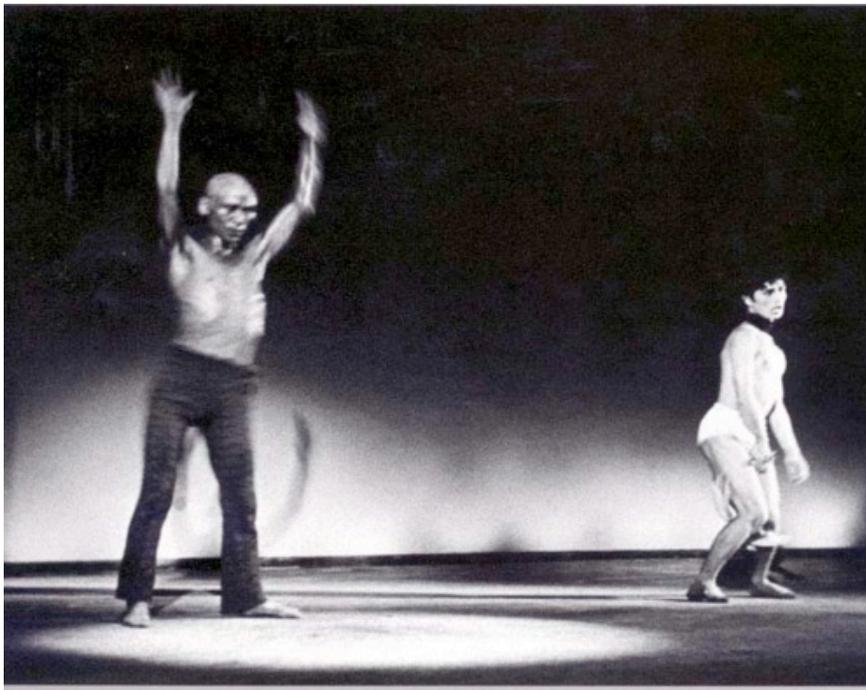
Butoh dance originated in Japan in the late 1950s and early 1960s and was first referred to as *Ankoku Butoh*, which translates as ‘dance of utter darkness’. It appeared on the Tokyo dance scene as a result of an artistic collaboration between the two dancers Tatsumi Hijikata (1928–1986) and Kazuo Ohno (1906–2010). *Kinjiki* [Forbidden Colours, 1959] marked the inauguration of Butoh.⁷¹ Hijikata was

⁶⁹ This approach is informed by Merleau-Ponty’s essay ‘Cézanne’s Doubt’. There, he undertakes a phenomenological analysis of the relationship between Cézanne’s ground-breaking painting style and his life. He underlines this point by saying: ‘Although it is certain that a man’s life does not *explain* his work, it is equally certain that the two are connected. The truth is that *this work to be done called for this life.*’ (1964: 20) In Hijikata’s case—as with Cézanne—we cannot talk about the causal relationship, but as Merleau-Ponty argues, every inspiration has its bodily residue, or to rephrase it, body has its memory, or body is a memory. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964). pp 9–26.

⁷⁰ As a matter of conceptual clarity I will indicate that to me the difference between ‘being-in’ and ‘being-of’ the world lies, in the case of the latter mode, in the acknowledgment of our genealogical kinship with the sensual world around us. This recognition revealing our grounding in the world in a concrete, sensual manner opens up the way for distinctly practical actions.

⁷¹ The title of the performance was taken from Yukio Mishima’s novel about male homosexual love, although its atmosphere and content were inspired by Hijikata’s reading of Jean Genet. It should be mentioned that there is still a lot of controversy surrounding this performance and testimonies are

then thirty-one years old. This landmark performance was prepared in partnership with Kazuo Ohno, but performed with Ohno's twenty-one year old son, Yoshito Ohno. It lasted for less than fifteen minutes and shocked the audience with its exploration of sadistic and homoerotic themes. The show was performed on a barely lit stage and was dominated by the violent actions of the character performed by Hijikata. The dark stage was filled with the scent of male sweat, and noises of sexual intercourse between the two male figures; this was not the dance movement the audience was expecting. It culminated in an act of sodomy involving the young character Yoshito and a live chicken, leading to its apparent suffocation. This legendary performance ended in scandal, which prompted Tatsumi Hijikata's expulsion from the Japan Modern Dance Association, and resulted in his name being officially removed from the Japanese Almanac of Art before his death in 1986.



(fig.1) Tatsumi Hijikata and Yoshito Ohno in *Kinjiki*. Tokyo (May 24, 1959)

From the outset, therefore, Butoh was conceived as a revolutionary dance, capable of expressing the idiosyncratic experiences of its creators as well as the confusion and chaos of post-war Japanese society as a whole. After World War II

contradictory. Bruce Baird, the author of *Hijikata Tatsumi and Butoh*, which is possibly the most rigorous monograph on Hijikata's art written in English, states that 'current descriptions of the dance distort it badly'. They simplify it, disregarding the context of the Japanese dance stage of the late 50s. For an in-depth description of the dance and analysis of the social and cultural critique that it contained see: Bruce Baird, *Hijikata Tatsumi and Butoh. Dancing in a Pool of Gray Grits* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). pp. 15–41.

Japan had to face challenges in every aspect of its political, economical, social and cultural life. On the one hand Japan had to bear the consequences of unprecedented political dependence on another country, in this case the United States of America, which had been permitted to locate military bases on Japanese territory. On the 24th of May 1959 intellectuals and artists from all over Japan were preparing for protest against the U.S.A's Japan Mutual Defense Treaty and it was then that Hijikata held the aforementioned performance. *Kinjiki* was based on the novel of the same name, written by Yuko Mishima, who was a fierce critic of the new political status of his country. This, in conjunction with fresh memories of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki resulting in hundreds of thousands of civilian casualties and the bombardment of Tokyo that caused a similar number of deaths, had shaken the Japanese sense of independence, notwithstanding its national pride. On the other hand, Japanese society had to confront its own demons from the past: the aggressive foreign policy of the imperial administration bringing about many atrocities in continental Asia, and a traditional hierarchy disempowering individuals and justifying their subjugation to the collective interests of the state.⁷²

Susan Fraleigh and Tamah Nakamura, in describing the formative period of Butoh, both claim that Japan witnessed the transition from the economical disaster of wartime and the period directly afterwards—in which a huge part of the population experienced starvation—to the incredibly quick industrial recovery that brought about consumerism on a scale comparable only with America.⁷³ This economic progress, however, came at the price of not only the loss of the bonds of traditional community, but also breaking Japan's archetypical connection with nature. It created a void in the social order as well as in the ontological bonds between the human being and its environment that had always been at the core of the Japanese worldview.⁷⁴

⁷² Butoh critic Kurihara Nanako hints at the confusion and suspicion among the people caused by such a fast change in values 'from the restriction of unquestioning obedience to the emperor-god to the "free choices" brought by "democracy"'. (Hijikata Tatsumi: The Words of Butoh. In *The Drama Review* 44, 1, Spring 2000. p. 18)

⁷³ Susan Fraleigh and Tamah Nakamura write 'In his lifetime, Hijikata witnessed Japan's military build up preceding World War II and its post-war Westernisation. He experienced defeat and drastic changes in political and social values, growing to extremes in 1960s.' in *Hijikata Tatsumi and Ohno Kazuo* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), p. 7.

⁷⁴ Hiroyuki Noguchi, an author of *The Idea of the Body in Japanese Culture and its Dismantlement* devoted to the historical development of bodily praxis in traditional Japanese culture states 'There is a national policy in Japan that has continued without pause to this day, for nearly 140 years, since the Meiji Restoration in 1868. This is the policy of Westernisation, which has led to the continuing

Butoh also expressed the dismay, felt by Hijikata and other artists of his generation, over traditional Japanese performing arts on the one hand and the subservient acceptance of Western forms of theatre and dance on the other. As an emblem of the aforementioned tendency in the context of the performative arts, Hijikata saw a disjunctive coexistence of traditional, highly formalised Japanese art forms such as Noh theatre or Kabuki on one hand, and ballet and Western modern dance—pursued by many young people of his own generation—on the other. Hijikata accused the former of losing contact with social reality and forgetting its roots. Hijikata, like another Japanese artist of the post-war era, the influential novelist, playwright and poet Mishima Yukio (1925–1970), realised that the Japanese society was at that time struggling to re-affirm its own identity in a way that would preserve the noble values of traditional culture and critically appropriate the Western values. Instead they both witnessed Japanese society plunging itself uncritically into the stream of advancing Westernisation caused by economic ties with America and the influx of American pop culture.

Consequently, the Butoh movement saw the need to reinvent a Japanese cultural identity. Traditional values and qualities had to be reevaluated in the context of post-war Japan. As Bonnie Sue Stein—an authority on Butoh at the Asia Society in New York—stated in her article ‘Butoh: Twenty Years Ago We Were Crazy, Dirty and Mad’, ‘Post-war Japan was a time for breeding a new code of ethics. Rebellion against a failed society was not surprising. The atmosphere was exciting: very unorganised and messy, the kind of confusion that tends to breed either more confusion or acute creativity’.⁷⁵ This resonates with the views of historian Lizzie Slater, who described the attitudes of the new generation of Japanese artists in the following words:

After Hiroshima the young generation of Japan, mauled by the War and the shattering of the past, needed to shriek out. Okamoto Taro returned from

disintegration of the traditional Japanese view of life and the body, as a whole.’ in the *International Journal of Sport and Health Science* Vol. 2, 8–24, 2004. A similar opinion is expressed by Sondra Fraleigh and Tamah Nakamura (2006), and Susan Blakley Klein in her *Ankoku Butoh: The Premodern and Postmodern Influences on the Dance of Utter Darkness* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988).

⁷⁵ Stein, Bonnie Sue. ‘Butoh: Twenty Years Ago We Were crazy, Dirty, and Mad’. *The Drama Review* Vol. 30, No 2, Summer 1988, pp 107–126.

Manchuria in 1948 and urged his fellow visual artists “to destroy everything with monstrous energy like Picasso’s in order to reconstruct the Japanese art world” and Okamoto went on to state that art must not be beautiful, technically skilful, or “comfortable”. Instead, it should be “disagreeable”, disregarding easy beauty and known forms of art. The post-war period in Japan was based on the destruction of old values. (Stein 1986: 115)

On the one hand, what was required was art that would reconnect in a more authentic way with Japanese sources. On the other hand creative links with Western culture had to be established in order to generate art capable of expressing the tension, but also the continuity, between the pre-modern and contemporary/modern human condition.

Hence, Butoh was born at a very precise moment of Japanese history, when its cultural identity was at risk. It seemed as if the cultural evolution was sweepingly relinquishing indigenous understanding of community and individuality; of the relationship between the body and the mind; and between the human being and its environment. Hijikata saw an urgent need to uncover the ignored aspects of Japanese society, such as deformity and insanity, in order to re-integrate these cosmic dimensions into the ‘nervous system’ of the Japanese psyche. (Slater 1985: 2, in Stein 1986: 115). Therefore, a revolution was needed to divert this tendency and it was the body—a dancing ‘corpse-body’, the body librated from social forms—that became the medium of this change.



(fig.2) Tatsumi Hijikata and Yoshito Ohno during a street happening (1960). Photo by William Klein, from the photobook *Tokyo 1968*.

4.2 Tatsumi Hijikata's Butoh

Hijikata's *Ankoku Butoh* has a complex genealogy, marked by multiple sources of inspiration and diverse areas of influence. Hijikata's work evolved over twenty-five years of activity, which in a sort of dialectic movement overcame, but also confirmed and explored, some of the different directions of some of the original ideas. This primary form of Butoh—almost singlehandedly created by Hijikata—evolved over the past fifty years to give rise to the much broader and diverse movement of Butoh dance. And it is precisely for this reason that it is important to provide a comprehensive account of Hijikata's work, so as to appreciate the very evolution and diversity that came to characterise contemporary Butoh.

Tatsumi Hijikata (real name Yoneyama Kunio) was born in 1928, in the northwest province of Japan and was the tenth child of eleven. The fact that he was born in rural Tohoku, as well as features of his family upbringing, are of the significant importance for an understanding of certain features of Butoh dance. His parents divided their time between labouring in the rice fields and running a small village shop. Hijikata testifies to having, in his childhood, witnessed instances of domestic violence, when his drunken father physically abused his wife and children. Years later Hijikata recalled these events, referring to them as if happening on stage: 'I felt I had to create a little theatre by myself.' According to Kurihara, Hijikata portrayed himself as acting the part of a scared, crying child, running after his parents during the frenzy of a drunken row. (1996: 22–23) The manner in which Hijikata recalls those traumatic events not only shows the impact they had on him, but it also reveals a defence mechanism that allowed him to alternate his approach towards real life events and his role in them. In clinical terms, this kind of dissociation is pathological; for Hijikata, it would become 'a crucial creative principle that he would utilize in every dance he created.' (1996: 23–24)

Hijikata also reported that, during the war, his older sister, whom he had a close relationship with, was sold into prostitution. This was a common practice—not only in Japan—among the poorer strata of society. The sudden disappearance of his sister—she was sent away from home during his absence—created a great sense of loss and confusion in Hijikata. The only way he managed to explain this event to himself was by convincing himself that she had died. And although he met her once,

years later, in Tokyo, she remained dead to him in a symbolic sense. And yet, in a for Hijikata characteristic affirmation of the coexistence of the realms of dead and alive, she stayed with him, as a spirit, in his own body. Similarly, the co-founder of Butoh professed that the spirit of his dead mother was living in his body. This conviction, shared by both of the founding artists, became not only another principle of their dance—in which dancers would appear as hollow bodies possessed by the spirits of other beings—but also of their life. In his text ‘Wind Daruma’ Hijikata makes a significant statement:

You’ve got to cherish the dead. Because we too, sooner or later, some day far or near, will be summoned, we must take extraordinary preparations while alive not to be panicked when the time comes. You must bring the dead close to yourself and live with them. (2000: 77)

He derived this belief from the Japanese cult of ancestors, widely shared among the rural population of Hijikata’s childhood and embedded in the *Shinto* worldview. In fact it was participation in the Bon-Odori summer rituals, associated with the cult of dead, that gave Hijikata his first opportunity to dance.⁷⁶

The rural life of Tohoku also provided Hijikata with other forms of movement that came to impregnate his artistic imagination. These were often minimalistic. It is as if the constrained movements of Hijikata’s Butoh find their origin in the slow, purposeful movements of peasants working in the field. Also translated in the dance was the movement—or inability to move—of toddlers, constrained in rice baskets as their parents worked. ‘Their bodies were not their own’, says Hijikata, and with respect to his inspiration he adds ‘What I learned from those toddlers has greatly influenced my body.’ (2000: 74–78) His body expressed, in dance, a tension between a perceptible impotence and resignation on the outside,

⁷⁶ The prominent contemporary Butoh dancer Min Tanaka, a friend of Hijikata who comes from the same region of Japan, explains: ‘Bon-Odori is what we dance in mid-summer when, in Buddhism, we believe our ancestors come back to earth. We dance with them. In the Nishimonai District of Akita they have a typical formation for their Bon-Odori. They dance in a circle and they say there is always a spirit between dancers. It is the prototype. [...] Later, Tatsumi Hijikata told me that, as a child, would also go to Bon-Odori dashing on the footpath through the rice paddies. He ran in a low posture, bent forward, so that the long rice plants would make him invisible’. ‘Min Tanaka’s Butoh’, Interview with Jiae Kim, translated by Kazue Kobata. Theme. Issue 7, Fall 2006.

and of the internal power and the vitality arrested in those young bodies longing for movement.⁷⁷

The relationship between the living body and the spiritual realm is explored in more detail concerning the notion of the body in Japanese culture by Toshiharu Ito—an art historian, art and communication theorist and exhibition curator—in the text accompanying Yoshihiko Ueda’s photo album *Amagatsu*.⁷⁸ He writes:

Since time immemorial, the body in Japan has been seen as an empty container. What was called the ‘soul’ (*tamashii*) was something that from outside the body, attempted to enter it and flow within the empty vessel. It is said that the making of human shaped figures, puppets, was originally for the purposes of sorcery. The word ‘puppet’ is made of the Chinese characters for ‘human’ (*hito*) and for ‘shape’ (*katchi*); we also have the word ‘*hitogata*,’ or ‘human mould’. These ‘human moulds’ (*hitogata*) would indiscriminately attract the souls of both living and the dead. Puppets then were ‘spirits containers’.” (Toshiharu Ito, in Ueda 1995).

The theoretical perspective established by Roland Barthes in his analysis of Japanese culture, *Empire of Signs* (1983) proposes that the basis of Western aesthetics is its tendency to crystallise around a centre, whereas in Japan any such centre is always empty; there is no core, and Japanese ethics start from this emptiness. Toshiharu Ito rearticulates this notion by contrasting Japanese and Western cultures in the following words: ‘We can symbolise the structure of Western thought by a perspectival system wherein value is rendered to the solid centre. In Japan, however, the starting point is a phase that is anterior to any such centre; the emphasis is placed on the very emptiness of a non-existent centre.’ (2005)

Toshiharu Ito makes a further observation concerning the process of filling the body-receptacle, in which mindfulness of the very moment of one admitting the other is of paramount. He states,

⁷⁷ As already mentioned in Chapter 2, Merleau-Ponty attached the same importance to a child’s cognitive and kinaesthetic development, indicating that primordial intercorporeality defines an early stage of the infant’s life.

⁷⁸ It is an album portraying Ushio Amagatsu, a founder and artistic director of the *Sankai Juku* Butoh company. Yoshihiko Ueda, *Amagatsu* (Tokyo: Kornisha Press, 1995). The introduction, authored by Toshiharu Ito, is not paginated.

In Japanese culture, the spirit is an outer entity that enters and flows within an emptiness. It was the very process of entering the empty container from the exterior that was considered important. So then, what characterises Japanese culture is the absence of an anterior centre, the image of an empty container. And the symbol of this culture is an empty mould being filled by a soul ('*tamashii*') or spirit ('*kokoro*'). The true '*tamashii*' flows outside our bodies. [...] The goal is not to fill a centre with an 'ego'; but rather, to empty the centre and to expose it to unknown memories and emotions. [...] It is not to stand in the centre of the world and to make it an object to decipher, but to allow the world to enter us, even at infinite speed. (Toshiharu Ito, in Udea 1995).

This interpretation confirms the central idea of Butoh dance; opposing ego-directed movement and valorising a deep somatic awareness; an openness to external stimuli as well as to internal unconscious impulses.

During his first visit to Tokyo, from 1948 to 1949, Hijikata saw a modern dance recital by Kazuo Ohno, which left a lasting impression on him. He later recalled that performance in 'Inner Material/Material': 'I saw a wonderful dance performance, overflowing with lyricism, by a man wearing a chemise. Cutting the air again and again with his chin, he made a lasting impression on me. For years this drug dance stayed in my memory. That dance has now been transformed into a deadly poison, and one spoonful of it contains all that is needed to paralyse me.'⁷⁹ Hijikata deeply admired Kazuo Ohno, calling him 'the predecessor of experience dance'. The effect of Kazuo Ohno's dance was described in a review as 'intoxicating spectators to enchantment' and 'involving spectators in 'his dance' with their whole bodies.'⁸⁰ It was this direct body-to-body experience, transcending the visual, that Hijikata was looking for and what he called 'experince'.

⁷⁹ Hijikata Tatsumi, (2000), 'Inner Materail/Material', *The Drama Review*, vol. 44, no. 1, p. 36. Later on in the same text in recognition of Kazuo Ohno's mastery and his expressive power Hijikata refers to Ohno as 'a dancer of deadly poison and a pioneer in experiential dance, an awe-inspiring teacher and a friend.' And he adds in a tender tone "He is a cabinetmaker and a poet who, with a fond gaze, singles out every work of unhappy heartburn' (*Ibid*, p. 39).

⁸⁰ Quotes from 'Ōno Kazuo no modern dance kōen' [Modern Dance Performance by Ōno Kazuo] in *Gendai buyō* [Contemporary Dance], May 1959, p. 27 after Nanako Kurihara, *The Most Remote Thing in the Universe: Critical Analysis of Hijikata Tatsumi's Butoh Dance* (New York: New York University, 1996). p. 47.

In 1952 Hijikata moved to Tokyo to study modern dance. He joined the school where he had met Kazuo Ohno in person. From that moment on their cooperation started to develop. In 1954 they first danced together in the contemporary dance repertoire. However, around that time, Hijikata began to realise that he was not going to succeed within the constraints of modern contemporary dance. As some of his contemporaries have reported, Hijikata's quality of movement and particular physiological lameness put him at a disadvantage. Nanako Kurihara quotes:

Physically he was rather stiff, bow-legged, square-shouldered, and did not look at all right in his barre lessons. One leg was shorter than the other, the result of having been pushed down a flight of stairs in a high school fight. So when he raised his arms horizontally, one arm would always hang lower than another. His body type did not fit the strict requirements of ballet. (1996: 17)

At the same time Hijikata became disillusioned with Western ballet in the Japanese context. He regarded it as an imitation. His reservations towards ballet were based on two propositions: first, Japanese people needed their own form of dance. This could not be a dance—no matter how impressive—that is a product of imitation resulting from the process of cultural colonisation. It has to connect with tradition and express the lived experience of the indigenous people. Second, dance as a form of art has to depend on the body and by the same token it also has to be an expression of the concrete body, acculturated and shaped by the concrete culture and specific conditions of the natural environment. Hence, European dance cannot, in technical terms, be a sufficient or appropriate medium of expression of the Japanese body. It was then that Hijikata set out to create the dance form that would reflect the lingering echoes of Japanese traditional life in contemporary Japanese bodies. Both Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno favoured the promotion of the body's natural abilities; they were adamant that the body should not be used as an expressive tool.

The primary figure that inspired Hijikata in creating his own universe was Jean Genet. Hijikata identified with his vision of the regressive world, marked by death and darkness. Just like Genet, Hijikata embraced his position as the social outsider, just as, in the past, Kabuki actors had done. From that position he imposed

a new paradoxical aesthetic upon the social realm, thus expressing a deeper ontological order.

In his text 'Being Jealous of a Dog's Vein', originally published in 1969, he expresses this idea in an even more powerful way, bringing images of violence, cruelty and pain into a unifying, uncompromising affirmation of life, even if it must give way to imminent death.⁸¹ He writes:

When I see children throw sticks and stones at a lame dog trying to slink from sight, then corner it against a wall, and mindlessly beat it, I feel jealous of the dog. Why? Because it is the dog that derives the most benefit here. It is the dog that tempts the children and, without considering its own situation, exposes itself completely. One kind of dog may even do so with its intestines hanging red from its belly. (2000: 56)

It appears that it is of his own 'lameness'—exposed to him within the context of the exacting bodily standards of ballet—that Hijikata writes. There is no lack of sadomasochism in the above description, which he continues by reverting the roles: 'I am able to look at a naked human body savaged by a dog. This is an essential lesson for butoh and leads to the question of exactly what ancestor a butoh person is.' And he elaborates on this visceral passion that he feels for the enunciated body of the dog 'I adore rib cages but, again, it seems to me that a dog's cage is superior to mine. This may be some old image I have. On rainy days I sometimes see a dog's rib cage and feel defeated by it. From the start, my butoh has had no use for cumbersome fat or superfluous curves. Just skin and bones, with the minimum of muscle – that is the ideal.' (*Ibid.*) The universe of Hijikata's Butoh was an upside-down one, defining, or deconstructing, the values of the modern world. But this deconstruction was informed by a deep sensitivity, an intercorporeal empathy, which the shocking and yet on a certain level, almost tender description attests. The theoretical impulse, as already mentioned, came from George Bataille. For Bataille, the sacred is not static, but dynamic and cyclical. In his early essay 'Big toe', Bataille affirms our condition as forever tied in with the ground, and denounces our ambitions for spiritual elevation away from bodily limitations:

⁸¹ Tatsumi Hijikata, 'From Being Jealous of a Dog's Vein' *The Drama Review* 44, no. 1 (2000): 56–59.

The division of the universe into a subterranean and perfectly pure haven is an indelible conception, mud and darkness being the principles of evil as light and celestial space are the principle of good: with their feet in mud but their heads more or less light, men obstinately imagine a tide that will permanently elevate them, never to return, into space. Human life entails, in fact, the rage of seeing oneself as a back and forth movement from refuse to the ideal, and from the ideal to refuse – a rage that is easily directed against an organ as base as the foot.⁸²

Visions of Genet and Bataille had exerted a strong influence on Hijikata. As Kurahira attests, ‘the paradoxical principle of celebrating the negative permeated every aspect of Hijikata’s dance, with its taboo themes of death and eroticism; its passive, masochistic, sacrificial body; its cultic group, and its sordid beauty’ (Kurahira 1996: 39).

Realising the above vision on stage, Hijikata’s dancers crawled on the floor with contorted bodies, trembling or lying still in a death-like foetal position. An eye witness account of the one of Hijikata’s live performances—from the series of performances titled ‘*Hijikata Tatsumi Dance Experience no kai*’ [Hijikata Tatsumi’s Dance Experience Meeting], seen in July of 1960—reflects this vision:

Several boys wearing negligees form a line with cramped shoulders and trembling hands. They look like a procession of polio children. Elsewhere, young men in black underwear and their heads wrapped in black cloth enter holding black cubes in front of them. Their bodies stretch and shrink, as they wind about, locked together/ Following them, a man in long pants ripples his sweaty, bare chest with wavelike motions, each rib discernible as he gasps in anguish. (after Kurahira 1996: 36–37).

His idea of dance was of the total dance, stylised, to a certain extent after Antonin Artaud’s *Theatre of Cruelty*. He articulated it by saying:

⁸² Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985. pp. 20-21

Audiences pay money to enjoy evil. [...] Both the “rose-colored dance” and the “dance of darkness” must sprout blood in the name of the experience of evil. A body that has kept the tradition of mysterious crisis is prepared for that. Sacrifice is the source of all work and every dancer is an illegitimate child set free to experience that very quality. Because they bear the obligation, all dancers must first all be pilloried. Dance for display must be totally abolished. Being looked at, patted, licked, knocked down. (2000: 39)

At the heart of that vision lies the premise that the dance performance must create an event that would evoke a particular kind of ‘experience’ both in the dancer and the spectator. Defining the notion of experience is notoriously difficult, and Hijikata’s use of it is not an exception. Originally it described in Japan the experience of the hermits. That refers to the state of body-mind achieved as a consequence of transformation. Hijikata implied something similar that would happen in the social context. Shortly after the production of *Kinjiki*, Hijikata presented the series of performances called ‘*Hijikata-Tatsumi-Dansu-Ekusuperiensu-no-kai*’ [Hijikata Tatsumi Dance Experience], and ‘*650-Dansu-Ekusuperiensu*’ [650 Dance Experience]. The word ‘experience’ was significant, as it revealed Hijikata’s thoughts on dance. According to Natsu Nakajima—one of the first people to dance with Hijikata, and who advised Lee Chee Keng on his master thesis—Hijikata saw Butoh not merely as an activity in which the dancer performed for a passive audience. Hijikata intended Butoh to be ‘a kind of ‘secret ritual’ [*mitsugi*] shared by both the *Butoh-shu* (dancer) and the audience. The relationship between *Butoh-shu* and the audience should be such that the *Butoh-shu* is the doer of Butoh, akin to a medium in a ritual, and members of the audience are participants or witnesses’ (Lee Chee Keng 1998, pp X–Xi). During the course of the performance the spectator must transform him or herself through the experience of dance, as in a ritual.

4.2.1 Transformation

Another word for this elusive experience could be ‘metamorphosis’. Klein explains that the use of metamorphosis has several functions: to assume marginal positions in the particular social groups; to fight the ideology of individualism. (1988: 38) Klein does, however, note that Butoh explores the surrealistic metamorphosis of dreams and fantasies in order to destroy the myth of the alienated individual, and replace it

with a fragmented self, as the first step towards the ultimate goal of reintegrating man into the universe.⁸³

The dance critic Ichikawa Miyabi has suggested that underlying the effect of metamorphosis on the audience is ‘the dual personality, or constant metamorphosis, of various characters, so that eventually, as it becomes impossible to tell the person from another, the individual subject disappears altogether’.⁸⁴ Klein adds that in this way ‘the audience is forced to take the first steps towards an awareness of the fragility of their own sense of self unity.’ (1988: 38)

Yet, for the dancers, the effects of the use of metamorphosis are even more profound in a strictly physical sense. It helps not only to restore the sense of ‘the body that has been robbed’ in the process of socialisation in modern society, but it also facilitates physical transformation. Ojima Ichirō, the founder of Butō-ha describes an improvisation exercise based on utilising the idea of metamorphosis in the following words:

When I was learning to dance with Bishop Yamada, I began by studying a rooster for many days. The idea was to push out all of the human insides and let the bird take its place. You may start by imitating, but imitation is not your final goal; when you believe you are thinking completely like a chicken you have succeeded⁸⁵ (Ojima Ichirō, Interview with Klein, 10 July 1985 in Otaru, Japan, after Klein 1988: 39).

Another Japanese dance critic, Keisuke Iwabuchi, contributes to the discussion on metamorphosis, saying:

⁸³ The theme of ‘reintegration of man with the universe’ in the context of challenging the notion of the subject appears to have an ontological bearing. Merleau-Ponty too was preoccupied with the redefinition, or even the rejection of the notion of the subject over and against the object, in favour of the realisation of the pre-existing element Flesh that is the principle of interconnection between human beings but also with other-than-human-beings. (*Ibid.*)

⁸⁴ Ichikawa, Miyabi ‘A Preface to Butō’ in *Butō: Nikutai no Suriarisuto-tachi* (Butō: Surrealist of the Flesh) Ed. by Hanaga Mitsutoshi. Tokyo:Gendai Shokan,1983) in Susan Klein Blakeley, *Ankoku Butoh: The Premodern and Postmodern Influences on the Dance of Utter Darkness* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988.) p. 71.

⁸⁵ Ojima Ichirō, interview with Klein, 10 July 1985 in Otaru, Susan Klein Blakeley, *Ankoku Butoh: The Premodern and Postmodern Influences on the Dance of Utter Darkness* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988.)p.39.

The main objective of this exercise is to exchange the “windless solitude” of the alienated individual for a sense of communion with nature, and to infuse the dancer’s body with “a kind of magic that attempts to regenerate both man’s sense of being alive and the power of primitive life, through a return to man as the ‘naked insect.’”⁸⁶

4.2.2 Gendered body

In the introductory section to the renowned *Butoh: Shades of Darkness* (1988)—co-authored with Nourit Masson-Sekine—Jean Viala points towards the facets of Butoh dance that the aforementioned academic fields can explore as a rich source of research material:

[B]utoh attempts to present the erotic as well as the ascetic dimension of the body by revealing, for example, the element of darkness and perversity which we all carry within. It uses the image of androgyny, whose mixing of sexes and roles epitomizes social disorder.⁸⁷

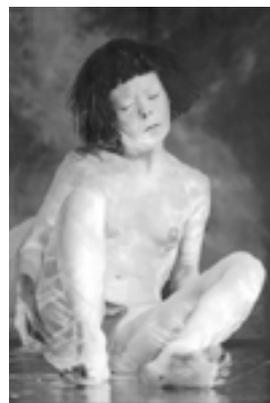
From the outset, Butoh explored matters of sexual orientation, drawing heavily from the homoerotic texts of Jean Genet *Our Lady of the Flowers* (1943); *The Thief’s Journal* (1949); and Yukio Mishima’s *Forbidden Colours* (1951–53). In Hijikata’s early dances he questioned the homogeneity of the masculine form by confronting aggressive and brutish macho figures with the submissive, and gentle comportment of what he at that time considered the essence of femininity. The latter idea had a long tradition in Japanese art. In Japan it is often said that Kabuki’s *Onnagata* are more feminine than real women. The *Onnagata* acting style was modelled on *keisei* (courtesans) whose lives were devoted to being sex objects (1996: 78). In ‘Inner Material/Material’ Hijikata also mentions male prostitutes as an anonymous but significant source of inspiration: ‘my friendship with the male prostitutes at Ueno Kurumazaka is what strongly inclined me toward the art of imitation.’ (2000: 39) These were the uses of the ‘feminine idea’. In an oblique way they worked rather as a counterpoint to a dominant masculinity, even if the depicted

⁸⁶ Iwabuchi, Keisuke. “The Paradigm of Butō”, *Butōki*, No 3., 1982 in Susan Klein Blakeley, *Ankoku Butoh*. p. 77

⁸⁷ Messon-Sekine, N., & Viala, J. *Butoh: Shades of Darkness*. Tokyo: Shufunotomo Co.Ltd., 1988, p.17.

themes from as early as 1961 were those of androgyny and hermaphroditism. However, it was only after the final explosion of his violent masculinity in ‘Rebellion of the Flesh’ (1968) that Hijikata began to use the female body as his main medium. (1996: 72) This was notably the consequence of discovering a muse in a female dancer, Ashikawa Yōko.

This encounter, paralleled with a series of trips to Tōhoku that triggered childhood memories, drove him to decisively pursue femininity and the female body. In his essay ‘Wind Daruma’ [Kaze Daruma] (1985), Hijikata wrote that he was taught to dance by the sister he keeps in his body and by the dead. He said: ‘I have a sister living inside my body. When I am absorbed in creating a



butoh work, she plucks the darkness from my body and eats more than is needed.’ Further, it is Kurihara’s contention that, due to the discovery of his

(fig.3) Yoko Ashikawa in *Tohoku Kabuki* (1985) Photo by N.Masson-Sekine

own femininity, by performing the opposite gender he was able to discover a fictional body and, most importantly, achieve a richer transformation. She states: ‘Killing his masculinity and pursuing the feminine body, he found a way to dance as ‘other’.’ (1996: 77)

In a phenomenologically orientated reversal of the dualism of body and spirit/mind, the Butoh body operates within the framework of flesh ontology. The materiality of the body is intertwined with its spirit. The flesh of the body is a sensuous medium of the inspired exegesis of the sensible world. It is only a unified body—at once spiritual and substantial—that can morph from one form to another. It must be the heavy masculine or feminine, bound by gravity, that can cast aside their current delimitations and assume the form of the Other. The transformation must occur in the realm of concrete bodies.

Hijikata, in his lifelong mission of creating Butoh, and despite its ongoing evolution, remained faithful to one leading principle, that of creating ‘a dance that would transform the human body and mind.’ (1996: 2) His Butoh was a relentless attempt to save the body from its subjugation to the control of modern society. Hijikata believed that the body had its own memory. In his Butoh training he devised techniques that allowed him to explore the deep hidden potential of the individual

body and the traces of its connection with the social body. In order to create his performances, Hijikata indiscriminately catalogued bodies. His dance was populated by the bodies of every possible being on the planet: Hansen's disease patients; pariahs; prostitutes; homeless people, but also animals and inorganic forms. He articulated this sort of phenomenological approach to collecting his material in 'Wind Daruma': 'If you listen very carefully, you will understand that I am not necessarily talking nonsense or talking out of desperation. I "gathered" the dogs in the neighbourhood and lots of other animals too.' (2000: 77) His body and the bodies of his dancers morphed from one life form to another, often incorporating inorganic forms. In the process of the transformation they were unearthing, the porous boundaries of their bodies always connected with nature and with the performative nature of their social persona.



(fig.4) Hijikata (1973) Photo by Makoto Onozuka

All these various inspirations were filtered through the memories of his childhood and profound somatic awareness. In the same final lecture 'Wind Daruma', given just months before his death, Hijikata explains that his invention of Butoh comes from the intercorporeal connection with wind and mud experienced in childhood in his homeland, Akita:

In the spring the wind is something special, blowing over the sloppy, wet mud. Sometimes in early spring I would fall down on the mud and my child's body, pitiful to its core, would gently float there. I try to speak but it's like something has already been spoken. I have the feeling there is a knot of wood, somewhere in my lower abdomen stuck there in the mud, that is screaming something. [...] I am distinctly aware that I was born of mud and that my movements now have all been built on that. (2000: 74)

By this he meant that his art was influenced more by the pre-modern lifestyle shared by the Tohoku people, attuned to natural cycles, imbued in him during his childhood,

rather than by traditional performing arts which, at that time, lacked vigour and were too distant from both modern and premodern life. In the past, Hijikata believed, these indigenous art forms expressed and safeguarded rudimentary bonds between people and their environment. In post-war Japan it was Butoh, as Hijikata conceived it, that could bring to light these existential traces engraved upon the Japanese body since premodern times. Many authors have identified these premodern and modern tendencies as being present throughout Hijikata's work (Susan Blakeley Klein 1987; Nanako Kurihara 1996; Sondra Fraleigh and Tamah Nakamura 2006). With hindsight, it seems that it was the synthesis of these tendencies together with Butoh's cross-cultural inclinations that could explain its growing universal appeal. It is also the coexistence of culturally divergent elements that allowed for an emergence of many forms of Butoh from as early as the beginning of the 1970s.⁸⁸

4.4 International reception of Butoh

The process of Butoh's international exposure and its subsequent acclaim were just as tortuous as its inspirations and was closely related with its institutional standing in Japan. Until the end of the 1970s Butoh was not only unheard of in the West, but also virtually unknown in its homeland. This was a consequence of its exclusion by the Japanese Dance Association, dating from the very first performance, *Kinjiki*, in 1959. Eventually, after nearly twenty years of exploration, development and evolution, Japanese artists started to go abroad.⁸⁹ Hijikata's most accomplished dancer, Yōko Ashikawa, initiated the trend by performing in 1978 at the Nancy International Festival in France, where she was enthusiastically received. Soon, others followed her example. The group Ariodone, created by Kō Murobushi, Carlotta Ikeda and Yumiko Yoshioka, first performed in Paris in 1978. Today Carlotta Ikeda lives in Paris where she continues her work as a director of the Ariodone dance company. Yumiko Yoshioka also remained in Europe. She created a Butoh centre at Schloss Broellin in Germany. This group was shortly afterwards

⁸⁸ At that time Hijikata stopped performing and, therefore, did not have such a dominant influence over his followers. From that period the first independent Butoh groups were established as well as new solo dancers, affirming their presence on the Butoh stage. See Hoffman, Ethan, and Mark Holborn. *Butoh: Dance of the Dark Soul*. (New York: Aperture, 1987).

⁸⁹ Beside economic reasons, and search for artistic recognition, this phenomenon also shows that from that moment on Butoh was mature enough to enter the second stage of intercultural exchange, which had strongly characterised its philosophy from the outset. However, it should be noted that Hijikata never made any efforts to 'export' Butoh and he never traveled out of Japan. Arrangements were made for his first overseas tour only shortly before his death.

followed by Sankai Juku [trans. ‘studio by the mountain and the sea’]—a group founded by Ushio Amagatsu in 1975. Both groups performed at the Nancy International Festival and at the Avignon Festival (both in France) in 1980. In 1982 another legendary Butoh group, *Dairakudakan* [trans. ‘Great Camel Battle Ship’]—founded in 1972 by Akaji Maro—also performed at the Nancy International Festival. From that moment on Butoh dance became an inspiration for many Western artists, sustained by the frequent tours of the above mentioned Japanese solo dancers and recognised Butoh companies, including Kazuo Ohno and his son Yoshito Ohno. Crucially, it also marked a breaking point for the reception of Butoh in Japan. The above sequence of events and pattern of ‘reverse importation’—in which young artists or new artistic trends are not recognised at home until they are successful abroad—is characteristic for Japan.⁹⁰

At present there are many Japanese artists residing in both America and across Europe: Germany, France and Italy being the main centres, with Greece, Poland, Denmark, Sweden, Spain and the United Kingdom hosting regular performances and workshops every year for last 10 years.⁹¹ As a result of the proliferation of Butoh practice and its growing popularity in the West, we should be inclined to speak of many Butoh forms, or Butoh inspired practices, some of which have only a very marginal affinity with the original ideas of Tatsumi Hijikata or Kazuo Ohno.

In his “Note on Butoh Body” (2000), Toshiharu Kasai—a Japanese dance psychotherapist and Butoh dancer, performing under the stage name Itto Morita—addresses the proliferation of Butoh and acknowledges the complexity of the situation. By using historical and geographical criteria he distinguishes three forms of Butoh. He refers to the ‘original Butoh’ as typified by the performances that were danced and choreographed by Hijikata. The term ‘classical Butoh’ designates the performances danced by Hijikata’s disciples; the second and third generation of Butoh dancers with mainly Japanese cultural backgrounds. Last, he uses the term

⁹⁰ The view that Butoh’s reception abroad and its subsequent recognition in Japan fall into the category of ‘reverse importation’ is expressed by Bruce Baird in *Butō and the Burden of History. Hijikata Tatsumi and Nihonjin*. (University of Pennsylvania, 2005). Bonnie Sue Stein wrote that ‘prior to the Tokyo Butoh Festival of February 1985, relatively few Japanese people had seen Butoh performed. In Japan, the form suffers from what is called *gyaku-yunyu*, or “go out and come back”. Until an artist gains recognition abroad, s/he is unlikely to win approval in Japan’. (1986: 114).

⁹¹ In 2009 London hosted two Butoh Festivals in celebration of the 50th anniversary of the creation of Butoh. These consisted of performances by renowned Japanese Butoh dancers and acknowledged artists of non-Japanese origin residing in the U.K., as well as workshops, lectures and screenings.

‘Butoh’, without qualifiers, in reference to every Butoh performance regardless of its cultural origin or lineage. By reminding us that, by definition, Westernised Butoh can never aspire to the status of original or classical Butoh, he dispels some of the unrealistic ambitions of some Western artists. However, he states that what is more important and what marks much of the Western Butoh movement as a ‘subcategory of Japanese Butoh to a certain extent’ is a struggle to overcome the boundaries of ordinary Western dance ‘in a gesture similar to that of Hijikata accomplished in Japan, who destroyed the convention of Japanese and Western dances and originated his own ‘un-dance.’(2000: 354)

An equally important set of characteristics that enhanced the proliferation of Butoh in the Western world—beside its critical, self-critical and evolutionary character, and despite the possible danger of it turning into a short-lived fashion for Oriental exoticism—was an exposition of the Japanese physical and cultural elements ‘usually considered essential in Butoh dance.’ (2000: 354) In that sense, Toshiharu Kasai says, many self-styled Butoh dancers, as long as ‘they understand and try to actualise the essential elements of Butoh’ give performances that must be categorised as in the style of Butoh.

Furthermore, in defiance of the arguments of the small number of Japanese Butoh dancers and critics that deny that western dancers have the ability to dance Butoh, due to their physical, mental and cultural differences, Kasai notes that ‘the tendency toward the essence of Butoh has become much more of significant value for foreign performers as well as Japanese Butoh dancers, with no remnants of the traditional Butoh.’ (2000: 355)

Akaji Maro—founder of the renowned *Dairakudakan* Butoh company—adds his opinion to the discourse about Butoh development in the West, reminding us of the critical impulse behind Butoh:

Butoh is just a Japanese name. There are many parallel dances elsewhere. When I first saw *Omizutori*, the fire festival on the hillside at Nara, an ancient religious ceremony from the eleventh century, the ceremony seemed like an imitation of my dance, just as I may have drawn from the eleventh century ritual. I was very impressed by the age of ritual. Butoh is something new, but there are many comparable forms throughout the history. Butoh is a form that almost precedes dance, just as a child moves and plays before he dances. [...]

Like flamenco, Butoh draws its energy from the earth. The style is different, but the concept is the same. [...] In Japan there is a great materialism and a great contradiction in people's attitude toward nature. If the unique economic situation in contemporary Japan is described as a miracle, then Butoh is another Japanese miracle; it is the antithesis of the economic miracle and it is a total rejection of the values of that materialism. We need to stop the accelerated activity of development. We need to block the velocity. Butoh is therefore a dangerous force. The way of Butoh is dangerous.⁹²

The debate about the state of proliferation and its consequences for Butoh, briefly reviewed in the above section, testifies to Butoh's vigorous spirit. It also shows that Butoh, as a form imbedded in Japanese culture yet conceptually underpinned by its original cross-cultural impulse, continues to grow and raise controversy. What is crucial to the context of my thesis is that Butoh, although dependent on the aesthetic and cultural premises that support its defined form in the institutional sense, finds its ultimate source in attunement with the concrete body. This is the affirmation of its inherent openness towards the surrounding world, at once the acceptance of its imperfection and its strength. This is the ultimate skill. Perhaps more than that, it is a mode of being that distinguishes the best Butoh practitioners. This is the fundamental premise, which because it is extremely difficult to be faithful to—and regardless of the origin of the practitioner—can secure the original force of Butoh, while allowing for a continuous morphing process. That is why it can be genuinely practiced all over the world and embraced by the audience.

4.5 Contemporary Butoh Practice

This section is comprised of phenomenological descriptions of Butoh performances by three distinct artists: Sanki Juku, Kō Murobushi and Atsushi Takenouchi. Its primary aim is to provide a suggestive description of the particular performative events that will allow a reader to imagine how a concrete Butoh performance, its idiosyncrasy marked by its intercorporeal intensity, unfolds before the eyes of an engaged spectator. I have no illusions that I can only achieve this aim to a very

⁹² Ethan Hoffman and Mark Holborn, *Butoh: Dance of the Dark Soul* (New York: Aperture, 1987) p. 76

limited degree. Therefore, to enhance this experience I will include a series of photo shots from these performances, along with descriptions.

The reason I chose these artists is twofold that they represent very distinct styles, which I believe are representative of the diverse trends within the Butoh movement, the homogeneity of which should not be overestimated.

Sankai Juku is a five-person company that stages large scale spectacles both indoors and outdoors. They are visually stunning and highly choreographed, with especially composed music, elaborate costumes and, last but not least, immaculate technique. Their performances are rich in inter-cultural references and often include a *sui generis* enactment of the prehistory of human kind. It was also one of the first Butoh Companies to perform in Europe (in Nancy, France, 1980), and hence, their contribution to the international propagation of Butoh cannot be overestimated.

Kō Murobushi's solo work marks, to a certain extent, another extreme of the spectrum of the Butoh scene. His works are often improvised; his stage presence derives purely from the intensity of his transformation, which is usually accompanied by only very rudimentary, if any, music and stage arrangements. He often performs almost naked. He stages his performances in small theatre venues; outdoor settings, and other specific locations. His style is described by critics as highly minimalistic. It is claimed that his is most faithful to the spirit of Hijikata's Butoh. Significantly, when the very first Butoh group—*Ariadone*—performed in Europe (in 1978), he was one of the performers.

Atsushi Takenouchi represents the third generation of Butoh dancers, who practised with both of the pioneers of Butoh: Tatsumi Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno. He created his own original style, expressed by the Japanese word "*Jinen*", which stands for the all-permeating life force. He began his training with the group *Hopo Buto Ha*, led by Bishop Yamada in 1978. During his engagement with Yamada's group he had the opportunity of being choreographed by Hijikata, and it was the latter's choreography, entitled 'Takazashiki' (1984) that marked Takenouchi's last performance as a member of *Hopo Buto Ha*. Atsushi Takenouchi began his solo career in 1986, dancing in Asia, Europe, and both Americas. He is currently based in Paris, and shares his time mainly between Europe and Japan.

Despite the differences in style, the three dancers all bring Butoh as performance art to life with particular conceptual underpinnings and a worldview that resonates with Merleau-Ponty's philosophical elaboration of the condition of the

human being, and of the phenomenon of intercorporeality in particular. The written texts and interviews of Ushio Amagatsu—the founder of Sankai Juku—particularly endorsed the conceptual link I made between the body-mind-world exploration of Butoh and Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of flesh.⁹³

Atsuchi Takenouchi—together with his partner Hiroko Komiya—became my personal guides, initiating me into Butoh as a path to self-knowledge, through the exploration of my body and mind. It was in Gdansk, Poland in 2003 that I participated in my first workshop with this exceptional pair of performers. Thanks to Atsushi Takenouchi I experienced a powerful connection through my body-mind with various manifestations of the corporeal world. Over the past eight years, I have danced with him and followed his teaching in four different countries: Poland, Italy, France and the UK, and am honoured to be able to call him my teacher.

I also came to know Ko Murobushi’s Butoh style through direct contact, while participating in the workshops he offered in London. I have also seen many of his performances, both live and recorded. The first of Murobushi’s works that I saw was his recorded improvised performance “*Edge. Violent Silence.*” (2000) His ability to achieve transformation through the most minute but precise and intense movements impressed me immensely. What bewildered me in equal measure was the fact that this intensity was not lost, even if experienced by watching the recording of his performance. This shows yet another manifestation of intercorporeality; that it does not have to be lost through the use of technological media.

4.5.1 A Dialog with Gravity – Butoh of Sankai Juku

The first performance of the piece entitled ‘Unetsu – the egg stands out of curiosity’ by Butoh group Sankai Juku took place at the Théâtre de la Ville, Paris, in April 1986. In September of the same year, the performance—devised and choreographed by Ushio Amagatsu—was taken to Utsunomiya in Japan, where it was staged in the old stone quarry Oyaishi,⁹⁴ some ten metres underground.

⁹³ The second reason for my selection is that they are artists who are personally important to me. *Sankai Juku’s “Kagami – Beyond the Metaphor of Mirrors”* staged in Sadler’s Wells, London (2003) was my first ever encounter with Butoh. The power of that experience inspired me, and initiated what has become, and continues to be, a constant interest in Butoh, both as researcher and practitioner.

⁹⁴ *Oyaishi* is a kind of stone.

The choice of stage for this Japanese performance is hugely significant as it not only symbolises, but also physically locates the performance inside, the earth. The stage is also filled with two inches of water, which, in turn, gives rise to associations with the primordial ocean and prenatal waters. Both themes are very present in Butoh. As Mark Holborn asserts in his essay ‘Tatsumi Hijikata and the Origins of Butoh’: ‘Butoh draws its energy from the soil through which the dancers move and from the primordial presence of the ocean.’ (1987: 14) The entire setting has, then, a symbolic dimension and a very concrete, elemental quality. Although Ushio Amagatsu departed in many respects from the visceral style of Hijikata’s *Ankoku Butoh*—which translates as ‘dance of the total or utter darkness’—he is clearly interested in exploring the phenomenon of darkness in human perception. In a comment on his later choreography “Kagemi - Beyond the metaphor of the mirrors” (2003) Amagatsu states: ‘I don’t think how to light the stage but how to create darkness’ (*Independent*: 25). This statement reveals something crucial about the staging and the effect he creates in ‘Unetsu’. I feel that the stage lights only temporarily displace the natural darkness of the cave. Also, a sheer mass of rock, and the density of the downward-pulling force of gravity fill the space. The darkness contributes to the density of the space. Any effortless upward movement—as is characteristic in classical ballet—is difficult to imagine. Hijikata often said, ‘I would never jump or leave the ground; it is on the ground that I dance’. (1987: 8) During the course of the performance, the dancers’ bodies fall, on many occasions, towards the core of the earth. This action, so common in the repertoire of Butoh movement, corresponds to a bodily, concrete level with the more symbolic idea of Butoh as a descent into the darkness of the subconscious. Both the invisible and the visible aspects of the environment, as well as the body, intertwine and resonate with each other.

The performance begins when the fabled light retrieves the outline of a lonely, white-powdered, androgynous and shaved human body from the darkness. On the right hand side of the water-flooded stage I can see a few large ostrich size eggs suspended just above the surface of the water. I can only see the back of this semi-naked person and the shadow cast on the back wall as it progresses towards it. After a slow, meditative walk it turns around and blows into an ancient horn shaped like a snake that coils around the dancer’s arm. In response to the call of the horn four dancers dressed in delicate, white dresses, slowly descend from the higher level

of the cave. They emerge from the audience and move along two sidewalls, two dancers on each side, to the level of the pool of water. They descend slowly, with their hands and bodies they feel their way along the surface of the wall that surrounds the stage. The wall is marked by notches, scores and carvings supposedly made by drills and chisels in the process of excavation. These traces of past activities of human hands are now read by the hands of the dancers as if they were ancient hieroglyphs. Following Merleau-Ponty's ideas, I could say that the sensitive surface of the skin of the performers, engaged in 'inspired exegesis', reveals the sensible flesh of the rock inscribed with meaning. (1968: 133) The flesh of the dancers' bodies communicates with the flesh of the rock. The kinaesthetic actions of past generations are mediated by the solid rock and, as if in delayed reciprocity, the touch of the ancestors is arrested in the flesh of the rock while still exerting its power, touching the sensitive skin of the dancers. After reaching the stage, the four dancers squat over the edge of the pool and touch the water with their hands as if performing a ceremonial ablution. In comparison with the flesh of the rock, the bodies of the dancers are ephemeral and descend to the cavity of the earth, re-entering the dark womb of the earth impregnated by the waters of the ocean from which the whole of life has originated.

Whether the performance is situated in nature or in a traditional theatre, it is common among Butoh dancers to interact with the seemingly inanimate aspects of the surroundings, finding its primordial vinculum. Yoshito Ohno mentions how his father Kazuo Ohno—before the performance of "The Dead Sea" at Théâtre de Célestins (1986)—started feeling his way with his hands along the stone wall of the stairway leading from the dressing room to the performing space. Yoshito Ohno's impression was that 'it was as though his hands were listening to something very carefully. [...] It struck me that his hands were more than an expressive tool; they were also guiding him toward something.' (Ohno & Ohno, 2004: 61). Equally, in the case of Sankai Juku's performance, despite performing a highly choreographed piece, the dancers display a very intimate relationship with their environment, tuning in to its distinct energy.

At the mid-point of the work is a section in which the four dancers lie on their backs in the water. They start to move slowly, raising their hands and legs just above the surface of the water. Every now and then they also lift their heads slightly, with eyes closed. In the first instance an association with a moving foetus comes to my mind, perhaps dancing in the womb. The minimal facial expressions of the dancers seem to suggest a focus on the subtle sensations coming both from within and outside of their bodies. Water continuously touches their skin. The liquid nature of their bodies resonates with the external fluid.⁹⁵



(fig.5) Sankai Juku in *Unetsu* (1986/2006) Photo by Thierry Orban

Through a peculiar kinaesthetic transference I become aware that the medium in which they are immersed connects them to each other in a more tangible way than the medium of air does in our everyday mammalian life, adapted as it is, to living on land. The element of water also has a corporeal nature. The singular bodies of the dancers are immersed in the fluid and the soft flesh of the water. The membranes of their skin become softer and more permissive.

Eventually, they seem to reach a stage of development that allows them to stand. Perhaps they have been born? And from then on their desire to stand upright becomes a struggle against gravity, motivated by the promise of separation from the unifying element. My teacher, Atsushi Takenouchi, often quotes Hijikata in his workshops, saying that the essence of Butoh can be found in the act of standing up. Each human being has its own unique way of standing up. Paraphrasing Merleau-Ponty's comment about the movements of our eyes I would say, concerning our ability to stand up, that 'it is a marvel too little noticed.' (1968: 133) Amagatsu, in his exploration of our motility within the gravitational field, takes an interest in the

⁹⁵ Amagatsu challenges our everyday conviction that our bones and muscles are solid. An image of our body being more like a bag filled with liquid is often utilised by various Butoh dancers in the course of their training. Such artists as Yoko Ashikawa, Yumiko Yoshioka and Atsushi Takenouchi employ this image to connect with the more fluid systems of our body.

child's developmental processes. He noticed, in *Dialogue avec la Gravité*, that a one-year old child is capable of holding an object, but can walk on two legs, which means reducing the points of contact with the ground to two. At this stage we become masters of balance, we align our body by allowing the gravity to pass through the axis of our body, which runs from the centre of the Earth to the sky. (2000: 22)

Just like any movement, standing up is characterised by different qualities, and depends on specific anatomical features within a 'standard' model of the human body.⁹⁶ But regardless of these variables, every action of 'standing up' contains relational aspects. It is about pushing from the ground, distancing oneself from it and yet never entirely leaving it—at least not for longer than a fraction of a second. It is about lifting one's own centre of gravity. It is about transferring the entire weight of the body to only two limbs. It is about changing perspective and widening the field of vision. This singular movement testifies to how we orientate ourselves—as individuals and as members of a species—within the vertical plane of the corporeal, physical world, between the support and attraction of the ground and the lightness and openness of the sky. It marks our postural distinctiveness within the animal

kingdom. But it also embodies all our efforts, passions and desires as human beings not only defined as bipedal but also as having emotional and rational dimensions that originate and overlap with the sensitive flesh of our body. It is in this way that Sankai Juku's dancers explore the action of standing up. It is a movement meditation contained within the personal, internal space of each dancer. They continue to stand up tirelessly and fall down violently into the water, faster and faster until they eventually drop from exhaustion.



(fig.6) Ushio Amagatsu on first plan (2006)
Screenshot from the Video Recording.

⁹⁶ There is an ongoing debate, within Butoh scholarship, concerning the particular features of the Japanese body and its importance in the creation of Butoh dance. See, for example, Toshiharu Kasai, "A Note on Butōh Body," *Memoirs of Hokkaido Institute of Technology* 28 (2000): 353–360; and Joan Elizabeth Laage, *Embodying the Spirit: the significance of the body in the contemporary Japanese dance movement of Butōh*. (Texas: Texas Woman's University, 1993).

In another scene, a leader of the ceremony engages in a kinaesthetic dialogue with two eggs. One is vertically positioned, on a pedestal. The other is suspended from a ceiling. This is a very subtle interaction characterised by corporeal reversibility, where the status of the subject and object interchanges. There is a strong visual contrast between the white surface of the huge egg and the blood-red paint of Amagatsu's fingers. At first the egg is a source of wonder, which is expressed by hands dancing around it. The hands are attracted and repulsed by the egg 'standing' firmly, perfectly grounded. A reflection ensues. Each egg has contact with the ground only through one point; its balance is precarious but always possible by virtue of this perpendicular line passing through the centre of the planet. At some point Amagatsu initiates a dialogue with the suspended egg by setting it in motion as if it were a pendulum. It is as if he is connected to the swinging egg by an invisible string and swings with it in a perfect synchronicity. This attunement through movement enforces a sort of identification with this object. In that instant, to my surprise, I learn that my position within the field of gravity is not so different from that of the raw egg, which also has its unique point of gravity, allowing it to stand vertically. I am immersed in the same field of gravity and in that respect I share the same kind of connection with the Earth as all sentient and non-sentient beings.

After a short sequence, in which Ushio Amagatsu dances with the egg, confronting and probing its physical structure, he carries it in a ceremonial manner to the pool of water. There, in the next stage of the ceremony, Amagatsu raises it high above his head and exposes it to the stream of the waterfall. The surface of the egg deflects the water in a spray and a strong stage light creates a mystical halo around it. Eventually, the increasing pressure of the water stream shatters the shell of the egg. That triggers a striking change of mood on stage. It fills with an ominous atmosphere that seems to have been released by the destruction of the egg. As a result, Amagatsu throws himself into a desperate search for the remains of the egg in the water. The futility of this action brings expressions of madness on his face. Chaos prevails over harmony.

In the last scene Amagatsu, in an act of appeasement, assumes the position under the 'waterfall' of sand reflecting an earlier image of the water falling onto the egg. He now becomes a substitute for the sacrificial object, crushed by the water. In a long lasting but tension-filled sequence, Amagatsu imperceptibly folds and slides his body upon the sandy platform, allowing himself to be buried under the falling sand.

He remains buried, while the other four dancers perform a dance of mourning. They follow the notches and lines on the rock walls to find their way out of the cave, leaving their leader buried. Sand continues to fall, obeying the force of gravity until total darkness ensues.



(fig.7) Ushio Amagatsu among falling sand in the underground quarry. Screenshot from *Unetsu: the egg stands out of curiosity*. (2006)

The Sankai Juku company, led by Ushio Amagatsu, has developed a particularly elaborate and highly spectacular style. Amagatsu admits that their performances are carefully choreographed with the intention of creating visually beautiful events.⁹⁷ In this stylistic choice, the founder of Sankai Juku stands in clear opposition to the austerity and vocabulary of ugliness employed in Hijikata's Ankoku Butoh. Amagatsu deliberately reconnects with the aesthetic principles of Japanese culture, as defined through concepts *wabi-sabi* (simple and rough, yet elegant beauty) and *yūgen* (sublime), resulting from harmony of body and mind, having its dominant proponent in Zen Buddhism. Ultimately, however, what lies at the bottom of the powerful effects exerted by Sankai Juku's performances is devotion to a practice that spans over many years, until it becomes a way of life. This, in turn, conditions the body-mind state of the dancers in such a way that it

⁹⁷ Ushio Amagatsu, Interview by Akihiko Senda, *1980s Theater Collection. The Grand Adventure of Small Theater.*, NHK, 22 January 1998.

operates on a high level of attunement. I think that the following statement of Amagatsu, originally describing a particular action of the dancers, clarifies the issue:

Their attention to the space, their bodies are transformed in a remarkable manner in comparison to the preceding moment, before placing the egg. *Slowness* and *precision* are here the actions that optimise the relation between the body and consciousness, and create an appropriate state for the finest perception of their modifications.⁹⁸ (2000, 24–25. *italics in original*)

Amagatsu's Butoh is enlived by the idea of the continuity of life that goes beyond the ideas of time and species, and is based, instead, on corporeal transmission, exchange and transformation. He attaches great importance to the idea that the prenatal life in the mother's womb is a repetition of the evolution of the living organism, from the single cell, through to the fish and amphibian stage, until it becomes reptile and then mammal. This transformation occurs in the *arche* waters of the mother womb that have a similar chemical composition to the waters of the ocean that gave birth to the first living cell on Earth. The compressed evolutionary process that took many millions of years occurs within the first two weeks of pregnancy. Amagatsu observes, 'During its formation, the individual repeats the evolution of the entire species; he is the memory of the primitive life and he becomes the course of the history of the Earth itself.' (2000: 16)

Amagatsu's view on the continuity of life shares the Buddhist view of rebirth, 'I am as an individual, because I have parents, and they had their parents, and moment by moment I reach this idea that I was born before being remade, in the womb of my mother.' (*Ibid.*) Amagatsu's views and their manifestations in dance promote an appreciation of our individual, as well as our pre-individual, life.⁹⁹ This

⁹⁸ Ushio Amagatsu, *Dialogue avec la Gravité*, trans. Patric De Vos (Paris: Actes Sud, 2000). Translated into English by the author.

⁹⁹ The Buddhist idea of rebirth differs but is popularly thought of as synonymous with the Hindu idea of reincarnation. Taiun Jean-Pierre Faure—a Zen master, and Abbot of the Kanshoji Zen Temple near Limoges, France, who, prior his Buddhist ordination carried out research in physics—explains: 'Some Buddhist schools sometimes wrongly use the term reincarnation, but this is a misuse of language. The Buddha clearly made a difference between himself and the Brahmins who spoke about reincarnation. Buddha always spoke of rebirth. There is no eternal entity such as a soul which might leave the body at the death of a person and which might come and take possession of a new body at the birth of another. Buddha says that all the physical and psychic elements (the five aggregates) which make up a person come together at birth, develop and disintegrate at death. These constituents are reemployed in various manners in the event of a birth. Thus the Buddha could say that

articulation resonates with the famous Zen Koan—a riddle that is asked in order to facilitate an awakening in the Zen adept: ‘What was your face before your parents were born?’ Amagatsu suggests an answer that points towards our interconnection with the entirety of Being.

A further concept of Sankai Juku’s performances is that ceremonies or rituals conducted in a meditative or dream-like state are sometimes counterpointed with outbursts of untamed energy, and facilitate a reciprocal corporeal resonance of the primordial connection with the flesh of the world.

4.5.2 Thinking in movement - Kō Murobushi’s minimalist Butoh

All four of Kō Murobushi’s performances take place within a similar aesthetic framework; the stage is devoid, or almost entirely devoid, of any external props. The absence of imported objects makes the dancer extremely sensitive and open towards potential encounters with anything within his perceptual field. Sometimes this is a structural element of the space, like a supporting pillar, another time it is an abandoned chair of an outdoor site, or a sculpture in a gallery. He moves naked, in apparent accord with the mainstream image of a Butoh dancer, wearing only *fundoshi*,¹⁰⁰ painted with white (Hakushu, Edge) or silver (Quick Silver) body paint. In general, he does not rely on background music. Silence serves to arrest the temporal flow and makes the audience sensitive towards internal sounds emerging from the body, and from the body’s interaction with the space. The only exception is ‘Edge’ where Kō uses the compositions of Osamu Goto entitled ‘Metal KATANA’; ‘Artaud x Hijikata’; and ‘Waves’, as well as Morton Feldman’s ‘Piano (four hands)’. His minimalistic style is adorned in a very measured way by stage lighting that, on the one hand underlines the unstable but permissive qualities of the space while on the other hand calling attention to the tiniest transformations on and beyond the surface of Murobushi’s skin.

he who is reborn is not quite the same, but not quite another either.’ *IZAUK News Letter: Zen News* (IZAUK), Spring 2007.

¹⁰⁰ *Fundoshi* is a sort of loincloth made of cotton or silk traditionally worn by men in Japan.

Ambiguous body

In all his performances—with the exception of ‘Edge. Violent Silence’, in which he starts casually dressed in a long sleeve top and a pair of trousers—I see his naked body, right from the beginning, glittering in the stage lighting. Murobushi’s physique is impressive. His body is lean and every muscle perfectly defined. His body, then, projects a powerful image from the first moment. His is a



flexible body that jumps in unexpected fits of

(fig.8) Ko Murobushi in *Quick Silver* (2005/2006) Screen-shot from Video Recording *Quick Silver*, Tokyo 2006

energy explosion. In effect, his body creates an extensive personal space that simultaneously guards his boundaries and, on another level, emits a force like a gravitational pull that attracts my own body towards it in a physical sense. These qualities are multiplied at the completion of a transformation.

Kō Murobushi’s movements lose their human appearance; he resembles a humanoid mutant crossed with a big cat, or a hybrid of insect and human, as in his solo piece ‘Quick Silver’ (2005). At one point of this performance, he rises up, extends all four limbs, and walks on his toes and knuckles. Each step probes the ground and tests it with a tiny knock of the bones. It is not the head that marks the highest point of this living form, but the hips, and the tip of the tailbone. The spinal column stretches towards the ground and the head hangs just inches away from the floor. In another instance he morphs into a tiger as he lowers his gravity point even further, moving with his torso horizontal to the ground. His legs push his toes against the ground, alternating the motion of his arms whose forward impulses come from the shoulders but originate in the expansion of the lungs. His moves are brisk and flexible, powered by the rhythmical inhalations and exhalations that fill his lungs,

expand his ribcage, and wave the spine in sinusoidal motions which lend themselves to the entire acture¹⁰¹ of the body.

The same body, however, shows another facet during the process of transformation: a stripped, lonely and vulnerable body, given away to the gaze of the audience and to the “touch” of the Flesh of a corporeal environment. This last impression is particularly strongly suggested in the case of ‘Quick Silver’, where Kō’s body is precariously planted on a dusty concrete floor in the middle of a dark concrete bunker. His naked body cannot avoid the touch of the concrete floor, which—as I can somatically feel in my own body—is hard and cold. On contact with it he tenses up to protect himself from its hostile touch. When he lies on his back, brings his legs close to his chest, contracts his entire body and folds in upon himself Kō portrays the vulnerability of his corporeal existence .



(fig.9) Kō Murobushi in *Quick Silver* (2005) Screenshot from the Video Recording *Quick Silver*. Tokyo. 2006

This posture, resembling the foetal position, is also often portrayed by Sanki Juku dancers, and most notably by Kazuo Ohno as what should be a comforting return to a mother’s womb. In Kō’s performances ‘Edge’ and ‘Quick Silver’, however, it

¹⁰¹ The term ‘acture’ was introduced by Jeffrey Maitland in order to express the dynamic character of the body, concluding that the word ‘posture’ is not always adequate as it suggests a static body, whilst our bodies are almost never static. ‘Acture’ is a particularly suitable term for the description of dance. Jeffrey Maitland, *Spacious Body: Explorations in Somatic Ontology* (Berkeley, California: North Atlantic Books, 1995).

appears as a hopeless cry; at once grotesque and dramatic.¹⁰² This seems to be instinctual but hopeless, because it is impossible to withdraw from the world in this way. This is his attempt to retreat into the body, to restrain his limits and make them impenetrable for the space that encroaches on the body and threatens to dissolve it in the all-encompassing Flesh.

Kō Murobushi's body-mind transgresses the region of everyday perception, is characterised by segregation from and a safe distance between the subject and the world around it, and enters a space of the chiasm, where a me–other, me–world exchange is immanent, although never complete. The boundaries of the subject are surpassed and it is at this instant that we realise that the encroachment of the world upon our body is always and already happening. Moreover, Kō's embodied hyperreflection also reveals something that is perhaps not emphasised enough in Merleau-Ponty's ontology: that my body and the world's relationship of transgression and overlapping, once it has been consciously attended to, threatens the very essence of the subject and might inflict inhuman pain. Seeing Kō Murobushi's exposed neck—his veins and tendons and his entire body tense to the point of destroying muscle tissue—I realise that descending to and reaching the ultimate dimension of body-world intertwining is a risky intervention within the field constituted by the chiasm. Merleau-Ponty seems to suggest that the world's encroachment upon my body and my body's encroachment upon the world is 'felt at the same time [as] the culmination of subjectivity and the culmination of materiality' and that it also means that '[my body] is the measurant (*mesurant*) of all, *Nullpunkt* of all the dimensions of the world.'¹⁰³ The above vision seems to announce the limitless extension of the subject upon the world. And this can also be experienced in Butoh dance. But, the complementary interpretation is also possible. As Murobushi's body seems to testify, a bodily interrogation of this region brings a momentary rapture, a sort of implosion of the subjective.

¹⁰² It is acknowledged in Butoh literature that 'there was a conscious effort in Hijikata's training to reconstruct a child's wisdom, a kind of innocence which children possess [...] especially in regard to their bodies.' The position of the fetus in the womb is perhaps regarded as the most radical 'return' to the pre-social form of existence. However, Toshiharu Kasai, makes an important clarification concerning the tendency to idealise this stage of our life: 'One need not assume, however, that exploring movements born in childhood innocence will be a pleasant experience. For Hijikata, this often meant exploring pain, fear and angst.' Toshiharu Kasai and Kate Parsons, 'Perception in Butoh Dance', *Memoirs of the Hokkaido Institute of Technology*, no. 31 (2003): 25–264.

¹⁰³ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *The Visible and the Invisible*. Edited by Claude Lefort. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968) pp. 248–49.

This latter interpretation, resulting from my phenomenological, embodied engagement with the visual material of Kō Murobushi's performances, seems useful in attending to the human and non-human duality apparent in his performances. The recognised Japanese Butoh critic Iwabuchi Keisuke addresses the aspect of non-human manifestations in Butoh, or, to be precise, the sphere of animism. He makes an interesting linguistic observation concerning the perception of human–animal relations as a continuum that is reflected in Japanese ideograms. He writes: 'In the world kanji [Japanese ideograms], the character for insect is the general term for animal. Birds are "flying insects", caterpillars are "hairy insects", turtles are "shelled insects", and the "naked insect" is man. All insects share in a common kinesphere made up of the horizontal plane, the space above, and the space below.'¹⁰⁴

This remark is useful in the context of the aforementioned insect-like poses assumed by Kō Murobushi. But it should be stated that it is not his intention to imitate animals for the sake of visual effects on stage, but rather to recreate a corporeal state resulting in the perception of and participation in the world that is shared with the animals. Hijikata expressed this view when he said that 'Butō plays with time; it also plays with perspective, if we humans learn to see things from the perspective of an animal, insect, even inanimate objects.' Hence, both the implosion of the ego and its limitless extension amount to the same thing, a radical transformation of the socially and culturally construed subject. While transforming himself into an insect, Kō embraces a perspective that is usually ascribed to the 'other' although, in our sterile environment we rarely even thematise insects as others but rather as non-existent. Their appearance in our ambience is surprising and unwelcomed. Shortly afterwards, Murobushi makes us fully aware that our way of knowing the world does not fundamentally differ from the way in which all animals come into contact with it; primarily through touch.

Maxine Sheets-Johnstone's draws an inspiration from Aristotle and Merleau-Ponty but also, crucially, by Darwin's investigation into the essence of animal life. She attends to this dimension of our contact with the world in her essay 'Surface Sensitivity and the Density of Flesh.' (2009: 136–148) Following the original Aristotelian investigation into the essence of animate life and its singling out the sense of touch as the primary and fundamental role, she draws our attention to the

¹⁰⁴ In Susan Klein Blakeley, *Ankoku Butoh: The Premodern and Postmodern Influences on the Dance of Utter Darkness* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988). p. 76.

fact that this also holds true for the human being; it is a fundamental mode of knowing the world. She states, ‘Like all other animals, we are always in touch with *something*, however far from focal attention that tactilely-felt something might be – the inside of our shoe, for example, or the shirt on our back, or the chair on which we sit, or the pencil with which we write.’ And, she adds, ‘surface sensitivity is consistently there, present, in the flesh – in animate form.’ (2009: 138) The exciting consequence of this ontological state is that all living things ‘are always potentially at the threshold of the world, sensitive to its nuances and portents.’ (*Ibid.*) When Kō with his hands shifts deposits of dust gathered in the unevenness of the concrete floor he makes me realise that the fertile soil always somehow rises to the surface of life, no matter how much it is dominated by technological media. Moreover, his animal-like explorations reveal ongoing transformations that affect artefacts of human origin and natural objects alike. This close, revealing contact of every limb with the ground—a synergetic interrogation of every sense of the space enacted from the new perspective, animated by the primitive, pre-eminently bodily presence—draws my attention to the thick layer of the corporeal world that I am not aware of in my everyday life as a human subject.

Once again, Sheets-Johnstone’s reading of the existentialist thought of Jean-Paul Sartre, and of Merleau-Ponty’s further development of it, fully brings out the essence of our corporeal experience, actualised in Kō Murobushi’s performance. She underlines the fact that to experience this ‘flesh of objects’, as Sartre called it, ‘the quintessential palpability of things – everyday things such as our clothes, the air, the wind – we have to attend finely and without haste. We have to open ourselves to the sensuous link connecting our flesh with theirs; we have to allow our own flesh to be awakened by theirs.’ (2009: 139)

This altered perspective brings me closer to realising a certain proto-ethical paradigm that resides in our most rudimentary, corporeal relationships to the simple aspects of the material world, affirmed by Hijikata as the ultimate objective of his dance when he said: ‘that road trodden every day is alive [...] we should value everything.’¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ Susan Klein Blakeley, *Ankoku Butoh: The Premodern and Postmodern Influences on the Dance of Utter Darkness* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 54.

Thinking in movement

In *Edge. The Violent Silence*, Kō Murobushi enters the dark stage in a casual manner. As soon as he reaches the centre of the stage and stands still, a dim light shines from above on his upright body. His shaved head glows and, covered in talcum powder, it is unnaturally white. His body begins to move. At first he makes only subtle movements, bending both arms slightly at the elbows with his fingers hanging loosely. He makes no effort to attract the attention of the audience; his intention is entirely internally directed. No more than thirty seconds pass, and he breaks away from this focused posture, as if unable to find a movement that would take him further.



(fig.10) Kō Murobushi with 'patience of not starting'. Screenshot from Video Recording *Edge.Violent Silence*. Tokyo (2001)

He takes a couple of steps towards the timber pillar supporting the ceiling, touches it with his hand, and starts again. After fifteen seconds of listening in concentration to the miniscule vibrations resonating from this natural material, he is violently thrown backwards onto the floor, falling some distance, as if a repulsive force had been activated. He stands up immediately but the force of the impact means that his body struggles to assume a vertical position, and sways in the search for balance. Yet from the unsteady swinging of his body a natural flow of motion emerges. The right wrist bends when the fingers of the hand stiffen. Kō balances on

one leg, transmitting the weight of his body to the left. As he steps sideways his arms simultaneously rise above his head, giving some lightness to the posture. But this fleeting moment is soon contradicted when a first wave of tension takes possession of his body, as if it had touched on something something very cold. The wave spreads and descends deeper into Kō's body, which causes the contraction of the thorax and produces a noise as if he was being suffocated. From now on it becomes clear that he is undergoing a transformation that, in the language of Merleau-Ponty, we could call a modification of the corporeal schema. Facial expressions are arrested in pain. The strain that is imposed on the movement of the lungs impedes his breathing and, very quickly, brings the organism to the limits of its endurance. That is to say, the would-be limits of an untrained body. The body is being killed and yet it is trying to stand up; this stiffness builds up in my own body as the transference of the body image occurs.

The performance develops along the trajectory of the slow progress of the transformation, but this is not a steady process. There are setbacks. There is usually a dominant quality to the body, of tension or release, and within that 'framework' emerge the particular movements of arms, hands and head. The whole body seems to be in the process of developing, something that Maxine Sheets-Johnstone calls a 'kinetic melody'.¹⁰⁶ But Kō at times seems to reach a dead end, and breaks the sequence. Sometimes, it seems that he makes a funny or ironic comment in Japanese, which is often met by suppressed laughter from the audience. He 'resets' both his own body-mind and that of his spectators, and begins again. But it is not a start from 'square one'. Over the course of the unfolding movements a sufficient kinetic density has built up. These are surprising moments that would be unthinkable in a traditional dance or theatre performance, as they would be perceived as mistakes in the execution of the score.

Kō Murobushi's dance is, then, the paradox of expression. It is a paradox because it emerges from movements that are not intended to express anything, and

¹⁰⁶ The notion of 'kinetic melodies' was originally introduced by a Russian neuropsychologist, Aleksander Luria (1973) and has been interpreted by Maxine Sheets-Johnstone in the following terms: 'Moving organisms indeed create kinetic melodies by the very fact of their aliveness. These melodies are created because qualia are inherent in movement, inherent in the dynamically moving bodies of animate forms. They are the foundational kinetic units, the cardinal structures of movement and of thinking in movement. A dynamically attuned body that knows the world and makes its way within it kinetically is thoughtfully attuned to the variable qualia of both its own movement and the movement of things in its surrounding world.' Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, *The Corporeal Turn: An Interdisciplinary Reader* (2009), p.253.

least of all particular feelings or emotional states. Toshiharu Kasai, Butoh practitioner and researcher, elaborates on this point:

Although Butoh aims to discover, explore, and liberate aspects of body-mind that have been suppressed and restricted by social conditioning, it would be a mistake to interpret Butoh as a method for expressing something prohibited or suppressed.¹⁰⁷

Yukio Waguri—leader of the Butoh dance group Kozen-Sha—also denies that in Butoh dance expression ‘means to show identity’. It seems that the concept of ‘expressing’ would also be inappropriate for capturing the essence of Butoh, if it was to mean that something internal—let it be feeling, or suppressed emotion—is actively forced towards the external. Instead, Japanese dancers tend to underline the importance of ‘simply perceiving the body-mind.’ (*ibid.*)

Maxine Sheets-Johnstone complements this view by considering an improvised dance movement as an example of thinking in movement. This movement has its own mode of inhabiting the world, thus making it its own. In her ‘Thinking in Movement’ she writes:

Thinking in movement is thus clearly not the work of a symbol-making body, a body mediating its way through the world by means of a language, for example; it is the work of an existentially resonant body. An existentially resonant body creates a particular dynamic world with no intermediates. The world it creates is neither the given world nor an immutable world, but a protean world created moment by moment. It is a world experienced as an elongated or ongoing present, one in which there are no hereafters, nor sooner-or-laters, no definitively expected end or places of arrival, and so on. (2009: 35)

And that is how I see the development of Kō Murobushi’s dance, as a development of ‘kinetic melody’. His movements arise from the finely attuned perception of both internal and external phenomena. In ‘The Edge’ it is a sensation of pain caused by violent falls, and the experience of the difficulty in finding a balance that inspires the

¹⁰⁷ Toshiharu Kasai and Kate Parsons, “Perception in Butoh Dance,” *Memoirs of the Hokkaido Institute of Technology*, no. 31 (2003): 257–264.

body to move in a new, unexpected and unplanned way. In a reversal of the classical standards of dance, a fall becomes a source of creativity in movement. It is one of those moments when the body's reaction at least initially breaks away from socially conditioned patterns. It is an instance in which body and mind act in unison.

In the outdoor improvisation, 'Hakushu', Kō has metamorphosed into an animal and is irreversibly attracted to a huge excavation in the ground—five by five metres long and three metres deep. He inspects the edges of the hole on all fours, as a big cat would do. He finally jumps inside and rolls in the sandy soil as if to get rid of skin parasites. Perhaps it was that his skin was itching and the sand in the hole promised relief. Or perhaps it was the pure pleasure of rolling in the soil—with its 'prophylactic' and 'hygienic' aspects—that attracted this animal.



(fig.11) Kō Murobushi after the metamorphosis. Screenshot from outdoor performance *Kakushu* (1998) Screenshot from the video recording by Claudion Calva, part of 'Quick Silver' (2006).

What is certain, however, is that this particular kinaesthetic melody, manifested in Kō's improvisation, was the work of an existentially resonant body that created its dynamic world and appropriated the surrounding environment, and which had awakened to the intercorporeal dimension of its existence.

4.5.3 Corporeal empathy – *Jinen* Butoh of Atsushi Takenouchi

Atsushi Takenouchi often describes his various choreographies and improvisational dances as ‘requiems’.

They are, then, dances that commemorate the dead. However, given his views—derived from *Shintō*—it would be more apt to say that they are dances that enable him to reconnect with the energy of the place that shelters the memory of the victims.



(fig.12) Atsushi Takenouchi. Photo by Konronsha (1996)

Takenouchi danced on the mass graves in Cambodia; on the grounds of the nuclear explosion at Hiroshima; on the beaches devastated by the Asian tsunamis, places which had experienced the destruction of earthquakes; in the Nazi concentration camp at Auschwitz; and at many others sites of human and ecological destruction. These dances all had as their objective the remembrance of those who suffered and lost their lives, and to celebrate the new life that always arises from the debris.

Takenouchi calls his dance *Jinen* Butoh. The Japanese word ‘*Jinen*’ denotes—in a broad sense—a belief that ‘everything exists inside a living God’ (in Fraleigh and Nakamura 2006: 129) It also expresses the continuity between the life-giving and the destructive aspects of the universe. Takenouchi clarifies this by saying: ‘Man generally receives beautiful forms from nature, such as the plants and animals. However, the breath of the planet also has destructive force; the swirl of the river of the universe embraces all life and death, light and dark. This is *Jinen*.’ (2006: 131)

In his training he uses the image of the breathing planet paired with its mirror reflection; humans breathing, vocalising and moving. The premise of the activity is that when it is seen from the outside, it appears almost as a group ritual that opens up

channels of exchange between our bodies and the universe. Breathing is a basic activity, with all living beings depending on some variation of it. Its life-sustaining function is crucial. However, it is also characterised by a certain rhythm; a characteristic of movement and music. In the first instance the participant breathes slowly by inhaling deeply, and extending each exhalation, while simultaneously moving both arms in the gesture of an expanding embrace of the universe. One slowly becomes aware of the journey that the air takes within the body; its entrance with its particular qualities of temperature, humidity and freshness; its dissolution in the porous interior of the body; and its exit, returning warmer and somehow heavier to the common space. Then one starts to vocalise, ‘A, O, U, M’ while exhaling; synchronising the incantation with a movement of the arms, becoming freer and engaging the rest of the body.

The breathing and vocalisation of the individual tunes in to the rhythm and voices of the partners. One powerful voice begins to reverberate among the participants, becoming the medium of a quasi-corporeal connection between everyone. Also, the movement of the participants—who are now freely exploring different levels with their bodies close to the ground, twisting and extending upwards—is reciprocally felt by each person. At the height of the engagement the entire arrangement of movement, voice and breath is experienced as if it were the dance of one large organism immersed in an even bigger one. There is no loss of individuality. In fact, every now and then each participant marks its unique status by breaking the tone of the common incantation, his or her voice hovering above the base line of the other voices. But with time each individual becomes aware that his or her skin boundaries do not mark the ultimate limits between them and other people, or between them and the world. Through attentively listening to the rhythm of one’s own breathing and movement, the whole body tunes into the collective, and here I must use the Merleau-Pontian notion of *Flesh*, which does not supersede an individual but which is, rather, reinstated or discovered as the other side of each person.

The process of sensual attuning gradually evokes a heightened form of perception. Otherwise unnoticeable subtle blows of air, and radiation of the warmth produced by the bodies of partners draw attention to the dense and rich fabric of ‘connective tissue’ extended between all the bodies. The space is no longer a neutral, transparent medium between bodies, located within its parameters—as the

objectivistic theory of space would have it. Rather, space becomes accessible to us in its particular, varying qualities. Moreover, we realise that the space and our bodies overlap, or ‘encroach upon each other’ as Merleau-Ponty would say.

Not surprisingly, then, ‘Stone’—performed in Lebanon in 1998—begins with a three minute solo voice improvisation. I hear a fluctuating voice that intensifies and diminishes according to the tensions and relaxations in the diaphragm and lungs of the performer. This is characteristic of the Takenouchi style of dance, which is initiated in the inward, visceral regions of the body. This repeats and confirms the principles of Atsushi’s work during the workshops. Vocalisation plays an important role in the preparation of the body. It calls attention to the manner, rhythm, and force of breathing in order to allow for voice emission. Each inhalation is at once the most intimate opening of our body to the external world and an intake of the life-sustaining energy of the air. The voice is produced in the exhalation, which resonates within the body and outside of it, in the surrounding space. It is the sonorous external form of the movement of the internal organs; a primary expression; a primary interaction with the outside. It also warms up the body very effectively. There are moments when the single voice splits into two. It is a rare skill, also observed in Tibetan Buddhists, and Takenouchi masters it. The second voice, produced in the throat, has a higher frequency and at times it intertwines with the parallel voice. At other times it provides a background auto-accompaniment. Its effect evokes the doubling up of a subject; a split within the unitary experience of the self or—perhaps less radically—the realisation that one is able to express differing qualities to the outside world at the same time. This phenomenon could also be interpreted in light of the Merleau-Pontian notions of dehiscence and *écart*, here observed in the sonorous dimension of our corporeal life, just as Merleau-Ponty traces its existence through the spheres of vision and touch.

This perceptual shift prepares the ground for yet another change in perspective; an ethical one. Atsushi Takenouchi—drawing from Buddhist and Shinto traditions—reminds us of the symbolic meaning of uttered voices, and of the cycle of inhalation and exhalation. The act of breathing alternating between inhalation, providing us with oxygen, and the release of carbon dioxide in exhalation has a powerful symbolism. Within this circular, dynamic, process we experience moments of taking in oxygen produced by other living beings in the world. We join the cycle of exchange; the chain of interdependency. The instance of inhalation is also an act

of opening up to the world; of being filled up 'with the world'. Then, in one prolonged exhalation, we retrace the journey of life just initiated by the generosity of the world. The 'A' is a place of beginning, its sound projected by only a slight



(fig.13) Atsushi Takenouchi dancing and Hiroko Komiya creating soundscape in *Stone*, performed in Bialystok, Poland (2000) Photo by Andrzej Zgit.

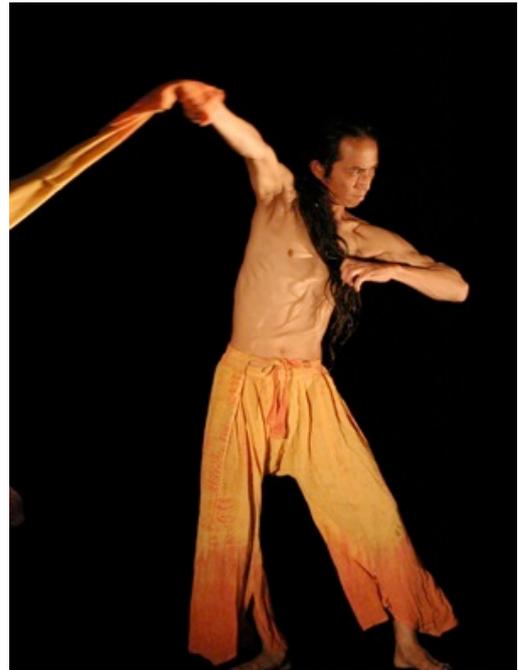
opening of the mouth. The 'O' represents the plenitude of the universe, offering itself to every living being. The 'U' is an instance of embracing the universe, with all that it provides us. The cycle comes back to the closed-mouth humming sound of 'M', which is place of entrance to the body; of exhausting the energy given from the larger Flesh of the world. It is an instant of stillness, which is the promise of death; of the ultimate dissolution of the egocentric subject. But it is also a reminder of the ultimate act of returning to the world in a simple, organic form; yet another transformation. Takenouchi comments on this practice in the following words: 'Through practicing this cyclic process of embracing and voicing, you move without form toward various inner life transformations.' (2006: 133) And, he adds, by expressing one of the essential aspects of Butoh: 'Allow these transformations to move you in your dance.' (*Ibid.*)

Atsushi now lies on the floor in the foetal position. At first he hardly moves and the only manifest motion is the rise and fall of his ribs in accordance with his breathing. Because of the lighting, Atsushi's figure appears headless. In Western stage performances it is natural for the audience to be captivated by the facial expression of the dancers and actors. However, Butoh deconstructs and questions the expressive function of the face. In this way, the rest of the body comes to the fore. The movement of the legs, feet and toes is captivating. They seem to have lost their ordinary, human functionality. Similarly, arms, hands and fingers have become almost independent limbs, resembling the movement of corals at the bottom of the

sea. These subtle movements are accompanied by the equally gentle sounds—produced by the musician Hiroko Komiya—of dripping water and shells rubbing together, evoking in me the sensation of being submerged in water. Together, Atsushi’s movements and Hiroko’s music provide a deeply relaxing quality to the ambience. The above is only the first of the series of images that will be evoked on the stage; the first phase of the transformation that Atsushi will undergo.

Atsushi Takenouchi’s training encourages us to ‘allow’ these transformations to ‘move us’. This is characteristic of his teaching but it also reflects the whole philosophy of Butoh, which is, in this respect, closely related with Shinto and Buddhist metapraxsis. Workshop participants are never directed to move in this or that manner. Rather than following something planned, or intended, they are encouraged to follow an impulse derived from the rhythm of breathing, or other bodily sensations. To ‘allow’ means, in this context, to be attentive and responsive to the sensorial and emotional impulses that animate us.

Transformation—or metamorphosis—is, as already mentioned in the comments on Hijikata’s views, the key concept for Butoh. In his workshops Takenouchi speaks of it as a precondition for the ‘Butoh experience’, not just its result. True transformation cannot be ordered from an external authority, or even willed by the dancer. For the transformation to occur, one has to ‘remove the wall of the consciousness that perceives the individual ‘I.’ (2006: 132) However, before a deep transformation can manifest itself—on stage or in life—Butoh students are encouraged to become aware of the transformations that occur in their bodies during training. In time one comes to realise that dance—or any sequence of movement for that matter—is mediated by a series of transformations. One of the most important aspects of the ‘Butoh experience’ is the ability to dwell in the time-space gap between two states of the body-mind.



(fig. 14) Atsushi Takenouchi in *Stone* (2000)
Photo by Andrzej Zgit.

In the second part of the performance Atsushi dances in a yellowish-orange kimono. His movements are human and full of outwardly projected energy. It seems to be a dance that symbolises the potentially destructive power of nature, incarnated in the form of an anthropomorphic deity. The repertoire of movements and postures that Atsushi assumes seems to be influenced by the idiom of Japanese Kabuki theatre with its stern facial expressions, stamping feet and arms extended parallel to the thighs, opened in lowered positions.

After a few minutes of this energetic dance the mood on the stage changes. Hiroko accompanies Atsushi with a gentle incantation that is ceremonial and meditational in quality while Atsushi moves around a stone. It is a priest-like sequence of gestures almost entirely limited to actions of the arms and hands. It seems to be a way of feeling the stone; perhaps sensing its energy. It is a conversation of two corporeal beings, where the consciousness of the dancer recognises and acknowledges their common, sensible nature. The passing of time is inscribed on the stone. Sentient hands can read it when engaged in the reciprocal touch where touching and being touched are equally distributed between the flesh of the stone, and that of the human body. Afterwards, Atsushi walks away from the stone and visits three points on the stage—illuminated by vertical lights—where he dances in an upright position with the same slow, meditational quality.

In the following scene Atsushi covers his head with his kimono only to violently tear it off a moment later to reveal an angry and stern face. To the accompaniment of the drums, and now half-naked, he seems to incorporate the evil and violent qualities of the human, with his scary face and strong, ruptured movements. He jumps, falls, rolls on the floor, tenses his body, and grimaces. After some time, an external force seems to impact on his body every now and again. His body responds with jolts. The intensity and frequency of the blows eventually breaks him and he slides senselessly to the ground and stops moving.

The above sequence of states, with the body-mind oscillating between meditational movements full of internal concentration, and dynamic, outward, sometimes violent, gestures illustrates the quintessential Butoh intention to reveal the light and dark sides not only of human beings but also of the world of nature.

This is not, however, the end of the transformation. Takenouchi reappears in the dim light in front of the audience. He slowly moves his arms in total silence, his open mouth and sad face convey resignation. This is a state where an individual

human being cannot incorporate and make sense of how darkness, destruction, death and evil intrinsically coexist with light, life, creativity and goodness. Man succumbs to epistemic indifference and this manifests itself as madness. Atsushi walks in a purposeless manner, his face grimacing, his mouth seemingly toothless, and his eyes wide open. He calls it ‘a dance of the crazy man’. But in the context of ‘perpetual metamorphosis [...] which operates on the principle of cosmic continuum’ that characterises Butoh and is concordant with the mysticism of the Shinto world, this is not the last stage.¹⁰⁸ In order to reintegrate the apparent epistemic and ethical duality of the world Atsushi needs to experience other forms of life and he therefore transforms again. Having torn off his kimono in the dance of the crazy man he is now naked, on all fours, in front of the audience. His movements have a feline quality. The rhythm of inhalation and exhalation propels his body and allows it to rest. His feet and hands, now transformed, feel and push up from the floor, powered by every breath. But soon this catlike quality dissolves, and he morphs into the posture of a bird. The front limbs of the cat have changed their repertoire of location and movement. They rest or move behind his back, and when the whole body accelerates they flop in the air as if preparing for flight. His head pivots and tilts, constantly trying to integrate the visual field. This procession of animal imagery is then repeated together with earlier amoeba-like movements. It thus traces the phylogenetic evolution of our species and the ontogenetic process of each human individual’s first two weeks of prenatal life. On the bodily level it allows us to somatically experience distinct ways of attunement with the environment; a characteristic spontaneously available to forms of life other than the human.

In his dance, Atsushi Takenouchi advocates not only the exploration of the life experience of other species; he also promotes an intercultural exchange. Takenouchi testifies to the culturally permissible nature of Butoh by concluding this part of the dance with a dervish-like pivoting on the spot that lasts for almost four minutes. This gesture not only pays homage to the land where he performs—Lebanon—but it also incorporates the mystical ideas that permeate the Middle East. This particular form of mysticism, called Sufism, seeks to reunite with the universe via constant movement of the body, the result of which would be a perfect stillness of mind and body; a change of perception that would allow a perfect attunement with

¹⁰⁸ Susan Klein Blakeley, *Ankoku Butoh: The Premodern and Postmodern Influences on the Dance of Utter Darkness* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988) p. 40.

the Flesh of the World. This section marks the culmination of Atsushi Takenouchi's performance. He pivots in front of the stone; his spiralling body morphing into a single ray of stage light, losing its materiality. The intensity of his outward movement, paired with the inward tension of his body-mind sends ripples through the space. Visually, this is the most sublime image of the human body immersed in motion, and yet it evokes stillness. Eventually, he drops to the floor shaking, darkness ensues and only the sounds of breathing or of the sea fills the stage.

After a moment of this intense visual and kinaesthetic pause Atsushi Takenouchi reappears with the stone in his hands, and lifts it above his head. He sustains it with unconcealed effort, as his entire body shakes under the weight of the stone. This effort is directly and somatically felt in my body. His posture projects utter exhaustion. His gaze is directed far beyond the limits of the theatre. This image transmits a powerful message. Here, in front of us, stands a human, his body naked, both mind and body exhausted by the internal and external struggle that marks his existence. But it is not only his body that is naked. He stands stripped of his pride, his mastery over the Earth, with his fragility and his violent drives exposed. And yet it is this human being that holds the future of this planet, of the many species living on it, in his trembling hands. Because this is also a being that can surpass its self-imposed isolation, reevaluate its self-granted authority over the Earth, and recognise its fundamental bond with the totality of sentient and non-sentient beings. It is a being that touches the Earth and is touched by it in every instance of its existence. It is the being whose sensible and sensitive flesh participates in the Flesh of the world.

Takenouchi's Butoh explores and expresses a profound intercorporeal connection between all living beings and their planet. Crucially, the realisation of this fact is prompted by the deep somatic experience of this fundamental Chiasm. Atsushi Takenouchi promotes the attunement of the body-mind with the surrounding environment, by beginning from an awareness of our own bodily sensations; the internal world of the body. Through the exercises based on patterns of deep breathing—vocalising and observing the flow of energy produced in the body during breathing—he promotes the discovery of an internal sense of awareness. He encourages us to notice the subtle changes that happen within the body when it is engaged in mechanical activities such as breathing and moving. One slowly begins to tune into the myriad possibilities of both movement and of our emotional states, and the fluctuations that correspond to a particular strength and depth of breathing. One

starts to wonder what sort of movement can follow it in the most natural, relaxed and energy-efficient way. And one wonders how, in turn, this particular movement projects and constitutes our bodily presence in space. Through this process comes a breakthrough—although this term suggests violence, which is absent from the experience. One sees how one can—by paying close attention—make small steps in transferring one’s consciousness from the dark, dense depth of the bodily inside towards the lighter and more luminous outside of the world, only to realise that the external space somehow also adheres to our skin as it fills our body from the inside, marking a continuum of the fleshy-airy being of two halves. The deeper half is attuned with the reciprocal exchange of the ‘in’ and ‘out’ of that element, which Merleau-Ponty named flesh; one recognises one’s own body as a special cavity, or a fold, in the sensible element of the world.

4.6 Experiential Intercorporeality

The following section is an exploration of the phenomenon of intercorporeality in the personal form of reflections on my experience of participating in two Butoh workshops and one special live performance. Initially, this will revolve around the notion of our relationship with the ground, or the Earth. The main event marking my reflections on that topic was the workshop in Venice, Italy, which was mainly outdoors. The second is my reflection on a single exercise enacted during an indoor Butoh workshop in Gdansk, Poland. In that section, I shall explore a dimension of intercorporeality suggesting a possible blurring of boundaries between typically human and animal forms of relationships. The third and last will elaborate on an aspect of intercorporeality which Merleau-Ponty called a postural impregnation or transfer of corporeal schema. This analysis is based on the live performance of Atsushi Takenouchi titled *KI ZA MU*, which I saw in Gdansk.

Does my skin separate me from the external world?
Magma, underground bedrock, surface soil,
the atmosphere, the magnetosphere - the layers of the earth.

Membrane of cells, internal organs, muscles, bones, and the body...
a wave of emotion, a layer of energy... aura –
the inner and outer layer of our body.

Perhaps there is no boundary between me and my environment.
There is only the sensation from the many layers of skin.

The life of the moment, the dance begins with this layered sensation.

Atsushi Takenouchi¹⁰⁹

4.6.1 Sensuous Ground

In the course of my Butoh training I have experienced new ways of relating to those aspects of the physical environment that are usually relegated to the background in everyday life. Butoh begins with our engagement with the earth, perhaps the most fundamental of our intercorporeal relations. Our silent, ongoing relationship with the earth comes to the fore revealing its subtleties as well as its essential, structural role in defining and supporting our being-in-the-world.

Most of the time, planet earth exists for us both as a mythical and an abstract concept, which vaguely defines our location as a species in the universe at large; the latter, surely, being to most of us the more distant or elusive conception. In a paradoxical way we seem to pay attention to the earth only in those contexts, and this, in a more or less direct way, suggests its demise or our departure or alienation from it. At issue here might be an environmental discussion about global warming, pollution and the impending destruction of the earth's biosphere or those technologically conditioned instances when we are on board a plane and see portions of the earth from above. Our advanced technology also brings mainly mediated experiences of space travel into play; although directly available only to few, with common satellite imaging these images shape our perception of Earth. There are also natural disasters, such as earthquakes and

¹⁰⁹ Text from the on-line pamphlet accompanying *SKIN*, a series of improvised solo performances. This piece was premiered in 2007. The pamphlet and visual documentation are available at: <http://www.jinen-butoh.com/works/SKIN.html>

tsunamis, which in violent ways remind us of the complex and unstable character of the 'ground' when it is subjected to the untamed forces of tectonic plates moving upon an underground ocean of hot lava.

In everyday life, however, the earth is diminished to a purely functional level as the ground, a surface below our feet on which we walk, run and drive. This functional character of the ground is further underlined by the ethos of urbanisation, with its dense networks of concrete pavements, tarmac roads and parking spaces. Our contact with these manmade surfaces, covering the rough earth, apparently there to facilitate our transport, to protect us from the dirty ground and its messy unevenness, is further mediated by the soles of our footwear. But the earth portrays itself in myriad guises. Plants grow in it, and animals and human beings step upon its soil; in sticky mud, the dry sand of the desert and the wet sand of a beach, the stones of a mountain trail, the fresh softness of turf, the qualities of sucking clay, cold moss, dry leaves, etc. Even artificial surfaces surrender to the dynamism of corporeal interactions, being constantly in touch with our feet and car tyres, aging and, as they do so, revealing that they are after all nothing but transformations of natural substances. Concrete pavements crack and crumble turning into particles of sand and dust with time, accommodating the growth of plants within their crevices. Stone-covered city squares, whilst constantly being polished and chiselled by rainwater and human feet, show the pale veins of other minerals, traces of volcanic ash fallout or other ancient geological processes that formed the rocks. In the winter, tarmac roads become pitted with potholes and gaps created by frost, liberating small pebbles into the streams created by thawing snow. In the summer, by contrast, the same spots lose their hardness and melt in the heat of sun, becoming a soft, oily mass, another transformation of the elements of ancient tropical forests, before they were carbonised. We encounter all these transformative processes, and formations of the ground in our everyday lives, but by the nature of our practical, busy existence, we do not thematise them; rather our bodies negotiate them anonymously.

However, the performing arts and somatic practices do attend to these essential relationships, and bring them into the foreground. No doubt every form of dance has a special and profound relationship with the ground. Ballet and

contemporary dancers are very aware of the relative softness, hardness or springiness of the studio floors on which they practice and stages upon which they perform. Butoh takes this awareness to a different level altogether. Atsushi Takenouchi, a solo Butoh dancer, and my master, always acknowledges during his workshops that the floor of any particular indoor studio, whether made from wood, stone, or rubber, is transformed earth, and in its essential sense is just a thin layer that, due to some practical reason, intermediates between us and the earth proper. Fundamentally there is continuity, a connection between our feet and the core of the earth. Below our feet, and moreover once we overcome the convention of touching the ground with just our feet and lie down on the floor, the living, morphing earth is below us.

The qualities of rough ground are preserved in the actual material of the particular floor surface with which we are interacting. Wood is warm and somehow still breathing; stone is cold and often naturally porous, but if it is polished, it facilitates sliding movements; concrete often ‘peels’ producing little particles of sand; manufactured artificial rubber has a base of crude oil and, as such, has a certain liquid quality which from the point of view of movement absorbs the impact of vertical falls, but also burns the skin. No matter what its degree of relative artificiality or naturalness, every surface ultimately has a natural origin and our bodies can recover this. Our feet, once liberated from the confines of footwear, begin to feel the ground in a more intense way. I say ‘more’ because, even when in shoes, our feet, together with the rest of our musculoskeletal system, always feel the ground and are, as it were, the first building block that sustains our verticality. But once free to explore with every toe, and not only the soles of the feet but also their sides and top parts, contact with the floor becomes a quiet, shy dialog. The floor, and if we are lucky enough to practice outdoors, the rough soil, perhaps covered with grass or gravel, becomes a rich source of stimulation for our skin and through it our nervous system. Once the feet are liberated from their functional role of carrying us from place to place and we allow them the comfort of exploring the ground below us they begin a quiet dance. In no time the rest of the body wants to follow. First hands and fingers make contact, then the knees, forearms, and eventually the

hips, back, the whole length of both legs and finally, the part that usually we take so much care not to bring into contact with the ground in everyday life, the head.

Once we exchange the vertical position for a horizontal one, the ground comes to the fore. It is close to us and we find ourselves connecting with a dimension that is, at the same time, both symbolic and deeply physical. Kazuo Ohno, for instance, inhabits this dimension in a way which forcefully opens it up to his audiences. His son, Yoshito Ohno, also a pioneer of Butoh, describes his father's relationship with the ground in the following words:

“Falling” constitutes an integral part of Kazuo’s gestural vocabulary. On watching him perform his feat, one has the distinct impression that an indissoluble bond beckons him to the dimension that unfolds “below the knees”. One senses that a close affinity exists with that lateral space ‘down there’. In falling, he makes the transition from his ordinary, everyday world, where he stands firmly on his feet, to another, “limitless” dimension. [...] On leaving the vertical dimension, he offers the audience a fleeting glimpse of another world, a world we don’t normally come in contact with. Bear in mind that he doesn’t accomplish this by merely dropping to his feet. Conventional dance technique could never provide him with a means of falling through the floor. The atmosphere Kazuo evokes onstage doesn’t in the slightest hinge on the actual physical location or conditions in which the performance takes place. Rather, it depends on the way in which he draws forth his inner world and renders it perceptible. [...] One could describe the universe “down there” as some sort of “horizontal plane”, or, perhaps, to put it more simply, the “ground”. It is remarkable that many dancers, and again I myself am no exception, are completely unable to integrate the floor’s full potential as a part of scenic space into our performances.’ (2004: 41-43)

Yoshito Ohno focuses here on images of the otherwise invisible, another world ‘unfolding below knee level’ that Kazuo’s unique technique evokes in his audience. This description also corresponds with, complements, and provides a

third person perspective on my own proprioceptive¹¹⁰ and kinesthetic experience. Our body opens up to the touch of the ground and is liberated from the fear of falling.

It has to be emphasized that we are not talking about falling in the usual, negative way. Kazuo Ohno's falling is more like a sinking below the ground, which contains a source of nutrition. This sinking into and through the muddy soil used to be, in the time of Kazuo Ohno's youth, a life-giving practice, as that is what happens when one plants rice seedlings. Perhaps Hijikata, in his *Wind Daruma*, was referring to this when talking about the origins of his Butoh as being 'born from the mud.' (2000: 74) It is a sense of going beyond the surface of the ground. I will describe another sense later in this section.

Returning to my experience of descending into the ground, this was followed by an impulse to relinquish the controlling aspect of our embodied being, by which I mean both mental and bodily attributes. The intercorporeal situation I am describing here, 'when things situated around a body assert a direct power over it' involves a being-done-to more than a doing.¹¹¹ The body allows the unceasing river of usually non-perceived gravitational forces to pour through it, discharging local tensions. When we start to trust the ground to hold our body, and make it our point of spatial reference by bracketing the usual vertical spatial orientation of the body we realise how much tension we hold and how it restricts our range of movement and bodily awareness.

This realisation could be identified as a 'kinesthetic reduction', which Elisabeth Behnke defined as 'a leading back from the lived situation as a whole to the specifically kinesthetic dimension of our corporeal complicity with this situation'¹¹². This is a further concretization of the phenomenological notion of *epoche*, introduced by Husserl as one of the principles of phenomenology, and

¹¹⁰ Proprioception is a term used in somatic studies encompassing the kinesthetic (sensation, control and execution of bodily movement) and somaesthetic (sensation and control of internal organs, muscles tension, posture and orientation in the gravity field).

¹¹¹ Dorothea Olkowski, 'A Psychoanalysis of Nature', *Chiasmi 2* (2000): pp. 185-204.

¹¹² Elisabeth Behnke investigates the profound sphere of our social relations and mode of 'making a body' via the prism of a kinesthetic style and traces instances when certain patterns established in unhealthy intercorporeal contexts come to hunt our body-mind, which she terms 'ghost gestures'. Behnke, Elisabeth A., *Ghost Gestures: Phenomenological Investigations of Bodily Micromovement and Their Intercorporeal Implications*. Human Studies 20, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1997, pp. 181-201

over which he pondered until the end of his creative work. Merleau-Ponty in *Phenomenology of Perception* attests to this fact by saying ‘there is probably no question over which Husserl spent more time – or to which he more often returned, since the “problematic of reduction” occupies an important place in his unpublished work.’ (1962: XII) Consequently, Merleau-Ponty also considered it to be a crucial problem, and no doubt it was this preoccupation that brought him to formulate, in the first part of *The Visible and the Invisible* titled ‘Reflection and Interrogation’, a methodological procedure he names ‘hyper-reflection’ (*sur-réflexion*). In this operation Merleau-Ponty perceives the possibility of transgressing the binary position between the subject and the object in order to reveal a prereflective bond between our perception and the world. He expresses this in the following passage:

‘...we are catching sight of the necessity of another operation besides the conversion to reflection, more fundamental than it, of a sort of *hyper-reflection* (*sur-réflexion*) that would also take itself and the changes it introduces into the spectacle into account. It accordingly would not lose sight of the brute thing and the brute perception and would not finally efface them, would not cut the organic bond between the perception and the thing perceived with the hypothesis of inexistence. On the contrary, it would set itself the task of thinking about them, of reflecting on the transcendence, speaking of it not according to the law of the word-meanings inherent in the given language, but with a perhaps difficult effort that uses the significations of words to express, beyond themselves, our mute contact with the things, when they are not yet things said.’ (1968: 38)

Although the above formulation still retains some of the dualistic language familiar from *Phenomenology of Perception*, it also attends specifically to brute perception, to prereflective corporeal experience and to its ‘mute contact with the things’. Merleau-Ponty makes it clear that in order to attend to this we need to become aware of the changes that our reflection ‘introduces into the spectacle.’ (1968: 38) In my opinion, the kinesthetic reduction, as defined by Elizabeth Behnke, could be perceived as a modality of hyper-reflection that allows us to inhabit the corporeal terminus of the perceptual ‘spectacle’. By attuning us to the

‘how’ of our kinesthetic organisation, we are able to unearth the intertwining between the mind, body and the world around us. In particular, we are able to realise how much effort we exert in order to resist gravity and the degree to which what Behnke (1997) calls ‘inadvertent isometrics’—socially conditioned, unconscious holding patterns of ‘trying’, ‘bracing’, ‘freezing’, etc.—shape our body.¹¹³

Keeping this methodological interlude in mind we can return to the description of the sensations accompanying a descent to the ground where we left them. The more we give up control of our body by slowly releasing its tensional patterns, the more the solidity of the ground, its being-here-for-us, is sensed. By neutralising the active role of my body-mind, the chiasmic relationship between the ground and my body-mind comes to the fore. Merleau-Ponty’s pronouncement that ‘there is a fundamental narcissism of our all vision’ seems to be pertinent also in the case of touch, which is the major sensorial channel with respect to our contact with the ground.¹¹⁴ The circuit of touching and being touched is also based on reciprocity. Merleau-Ponty speaks in the context of *Einfühlung*. He tentatively frames this idea in his lecture notes in the following words: ‘Body-things, penetration, at a distance, of the sensible things by my body. Things as what are [*sic*] missing from my body in order to close its circuit.’ (2003: 218) Despite his succinct form of expression Merleau-Ponty clearly conveys that it is not a contingent fact that the flesh of my body is always encroached upon by the flesh of a different body. The fundamental opening of my body, its ex-stasis in a Heideggerian sense, requires, and in fact is founded upon a perceptual terminus, which takes the form of myriad things furnishing the surrounding environment.

¹¹³ One of the inspirations for the term ‘inadvertent isometrics’ can be found in Thomas Hanna’s work, *Somatics* (1988), where he points to the notion of static, ‘isometric’ muscular contractions, known from ‘isometric exercises’, involving setting one group of muscles in opposition to another (e.g., pressing the palms of one’s hands together as hard as one can). However the inadvertent, hence involuntary, patterns of contraction and tension contribute to the creation of a ‘holding pattern’ in which movement is simultaneously produced and arrested, energy expended, kinesthetic efficiency and somatic sensitivity diminished. *Ibid.*, 191. The work of Thomas Hanna called ‘somatic re-education’ is based on the Feldenkrais method. See: Hanna, Thomas., *Somatics*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1988.

¹¹⁴ Merleau-Ponty writes, in the context of his analysis of the vision, about ‘the second, more profound sense of narcissism: not to see in the outside, as the others see it, the contour of a body one inhabits, but especially to be seen by the outside, to exist within it, to emigrate into it, to be seduced, captivated, alienated by the phantom, so that the seer and the visible reciprocate one another and we no longer know which sees and which is seen.’

From the perspective of my body, the ‘flesh’ of the earth has an inconceivable depth which, although already opened up before my body, can be brought to my explicit awareness. Moreover, I can experience that I am already included in it. Merleau-Ponty sometimes calls this depth a vertical being and at other places, after Husserl, an ‘interior horizon’. Both, however, indicate a dimension hidden beneath the surface of corporeal things, a type of spacious being. Merleau-Ponty comments:

‘When Husserl spoke of the horizon of the things—of their exterior horizon, which everybody knows, and of their “interior horizon”, that darkness stuffed with visibility of which their surface is but the limit—it is necessary to take the term seriously. No more than sky or earth is the horizon a collection of things held together, or a class name, or a logical possibility of conception, or a system of “potentiality of consciousness”: it is a new type of being, a being by porosity, pregnancy, or generality, and he before whom the horizon opens is caught up, included within it. His body and the distances participate in one same *corporeity or visibility in general*, which reigns between them and it, and even beyond the horizon, beneath his skin, unto the depths of being.’ (1968: 148-149)

It’s true that, intellectually, we know that the earth has a particular structure – that it consists of four spherical layers: crust, mantle, outer core and inner core, each of them with its own specific properties. This is objective knowledge supported by the rigour of scientific method. And yet, despite my confidence in the factual status of this model, it must be acknowledged that the core of the earth with its subsequent structural elements is more of an abstract image than a source of any real sensation. In fact, this model is propagated in primary education in the form of a graphic diagram and I can readily recall this representation of our planet. Despite this well-established knowledge, it is only an image of a distant scientific model which does not correspond with my everyday experience. The idea of the earth conveyed by that image is, to paraphrase Merleau-Ponty’s statement regarding the attitude of the science toward the visible world,

‘detached from the sensible appearances, and ... erected into a second positivity’.¹¹⁵

However there are instances when the density of the earth’s flesh can be penetrated, not through my imagination or intellectual reasoning, but through the senses, and this is where Merleau-Ponty’s idea of proximity through distance can take on a very concrete form. A workshop I attended on the island of Giudecca in Venice provided me with insight into the fact that we have this ability to sense the ground beyond its surface.

Giudecca is an island in the Venetian Lagoon in northern Italy. It lies immediately south of the central islands of Venice, from which it is separated by the Giudecca Canal. It is around 2 km long and on average 300m wide. The seven day workshop took place inside the former convent of St. Cosma and St. Damiano which nowadays functions as an art centre.

In Butoh practice, and especially in Butoh training, the sense of touch is given special status, or to put it more accurately, as indeed vision also plays a key role, it is allowed to take its due place in the synesthetic system of our senses.¹¹⁶ Through tactile contact I palpate the sensuous surface of the ground, even if it is just the wooden floor of a studio and the depth of the ground is merely anticipated. But, as indicated earlier, an opportunity to explore these sensations in outdoor spaces, on grass, for instance, intensifies this experience, and this is what happened during that workshop on the island of Giudecca. On one particular day we were dancing in the convent’s square. The square, which is surrounded by arcades, was itself covered with turf, and there were a couple of midsized trees

¹¹⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), p. 149. Of course this is an example of a much broader epistemological issue regarding the relationship between objective scientific knowledge and the subjective experience. There would be many other instances of discrepancies between our sensorial experience and objective knowledge, starting from the most ancient belief that the sun circles around the earth. I cannot engage with this debate. It should suffice to state that the phenomenological approach, does not reject, but suspends objective, scientific knowledge in an effort to unearth the structure and content of the lived experience.

¹¹⁶ It is true that Merleau-Ponty devoted much more space to his analysis of vision than to the other senses. He took visual art, painting in particular, as an exemplary art form through which to explore our corporeal intertwinement with the world, hence his analyses of the works of Cezanne, Matisse and Renoir. However, touch, although not as prominent as vision, occupies a crucial role in Merleau-Ponty’s elaboration of ontology of flesh. The model of reversibility within the element of flesh is explained upon the example of the hand being touching-touched. And Merleau-Ponty even goes on to say that eyesight is an extension of touch. Ultimately, however, all senses work as a synesthetic system, they are various ‘folds’ within the flesh of the body.

also growing on it. It was in this ordinary setting that, no doubt as a result of practice on earlier days, I experienced a heightened bodily awareness.

The surface of the ground withholds the invisible layers of the earth's interior. There can be no doubt about this when we rely on eyesight as our sensorial medium. The dark mass of the earth is impenetrable. However, if we turn to the senses of touch and hearing, the permeable boundaries of both our skin and of the ground's surface encroach upon each other. When I moved gently upon the surface of the grassy ground, adhering to it with my entire body, the coolness of the under-ground was transferred onto my body. At the same time the contrasting heat of the sun made my muscles relax. My flesh, which is eighty-percent water, poured over the surface taking its bony structures with it. And so my body underwent a gentle metamorphosis. It did not exert its active role upon the surface of the ground but rather seemed to pour into all its tiny gaps and unevenness. I touched it and I felt myself being touched by it. I sensed the different textures of blades of grass, naked patches of top soil, the hardness of the little stones and pebbles that were scattered here and there. I felt a reciprocal, if asymmetrical, relation between the sensuous mass of the ground and the mass of my body. Alphonso Lingis in *Phenomenological Explanations* (1986), recovering the passive mode of our interaction with the elemental ground, states that sensing this element is not a 'prize', a taking hold of it; it would rather be a being taken, a being held by it. He goes on to acknowledge the intercorporeal relation between our body and the ground in the following words:

'Here, to sense is to sense the substantial. Not the substrate that supports the qualitative properties, but rather the qualitative properties found supporting oneself. The force of things is not only experienced as resistance, as exclusion, by which the thing is *partes extra partes*, and excludes us from its place and time. The forces with which we hold ourselves in our posture and exert our motility have incorporated the supporting force of the ground. This incorporation senses the ground.'
(1986: 67)

I have mentioned in the brief topographical account of my surroundings in Guidecca that there were couple of trees in the convent square. Their presence

turned out to be of crucial importance. David Abram in *The Spell of the Sensuous*, whilst carrying out an analysis aimed at recovering the carnal sense of such terms as ‘the past’ and ‘the future’, prescribes a privileged position to the ground as a depository of ‘the past’. Together with the ground, however, he underlines the special status of sentient beings such as plants, but also animals and our human bodies, as deposits of the past. He writes ‘the living terrain is supported not only by that more settled or sedimented past under the ground, but by an immanent past resting inside each tree, within each blade of grass, within the very muscles and cells of our own bodies’¹¹⁷. Surely no other sentient beings are as obviously connected with the Earth as plants are. But trees are particularly significant as living records of the conditions of their local environment. Due to their longevity, staying rooted in a particular place, and with the ability to sense the environment and adjust their morphology, physiology and phenotype (the process of which is called ‘plant perception’ in botany), they may register very subtle changes in climate and ground composition¹¹⁸. Therefore they can be perceived as an organic extension of the earth. Moreover, each tree is a very particular transformation of organic and inorganic elements specific to its location, including, again, its climate, land formation, and so on.¹¹⁹

My experience did not provide me with an insight into the climate change recording capacities of trees. Rather, it revealed a spatial feature of trees, of which I was not hitherto aware and which is consistent with the substantial interpretation of Flesh ontology. In the course of exploring my relationship with the surface of the ground I came across the trunk of one of the trees growing in the middle of the square, which was located in the middle of this fairly large island. As I applied my body to its bark, to my astonishment, I began to hear the splash of the waters of the Venetian Laguna (I should stress that there was no other source of water nearby). This sound, which was not audible in open space, was being transmitted through the island’s thick layer of rock and soil, absorbed

¹¹⁷ Abram, David. “*The Spell of the Sensuous. Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World.*”, New York: Vintage Books, 1996, p. 215.

¹¹⁸ Taiz, Lincoln; Eduardo Zeiger, *Plant Physiology*, fourth edition, Sinauer Associates, 2006.

¹¹⁹ Ecologists and environmental scientists study the recent past of a particular place by ‘coring’ several standing trees, in order to count their interior rings and interpret the varying width of those rings (an extra-wide layer, fourteen rings in from the cambium, suggests a season of abundant rain fourteen years into the depth of the past, while an extra-thin layer tells of a year without rainfall). *Ibid.*, p. 215

by the roots of the tree, and then delivered to my ears. This fact in itself has a physical basis, but it is when this physical phenomenon became incorporated into my living experience, having been detected as it were within my corporeal awareness without a prior theoretical focus, that it testified to the facticity of this ontological structure. The horizon of my corporeal perception was not blocked by the surface of the ground directly under my feet, but rather there was a sense of a dynamic continuity, of a corporeal relation between myself, the plants, the ground and what is underground, on this occasion the sea. This is an instance of intercorporeality, as a propagation of the sonorous, vibrational quality of the flesh across distinct bodies. All beings are sensible, not all sentient, some sentient to a different degree, but all linked within the circle of reversibility, this ‘ultimate truth’ of Ontology of Flesh.

4.6.2 Inter-being

I have already written about the somatic effects of paying attention to the rhythm and depth of inhalation-exhalation while vocalizing and moving in a group in the last section of Chapter 4, where the Butoh style of Atsushi Takenouchi was presented. Here I will focus on another exercise, which by promoting a deeper awareness of breathing can affect both the proprioceptive and kinesthetic aspects of self-perception and consequently open the possibility of relating to others on an intercorporeal level. This exercise, or dance improvisation, as that is what it became, made me aware of the changing quality of space; its fluidity, its opacity, in other words its distinct presence, which revealed itself during dance.

The initial instruction was just to breathe with eyes half-closed. Then we were encouraged to think of an animal that we would attempt to transform into. The transformation was mainly effected by the change of birthing: its depth and rhythm, rather than by stylized movements. Once the impulse to move came, we started moving in the space with eyes nearly closed, having a peripheral view, rather than a direct gaze, while at the same time transforming into different animals. The encounters with the other participants, by then liberated from their

social persona, transformed into various non-human beings, were very powerful. Senses of touch, hearing, and smell were activated to an extent that I have never experienced before in a situation when other people were involved. The quality of my birthing, influencing in turn the degree of tension of my muscles, the speed of my movement and the felt extent of my kinesphere defined my alternative somatic state.

Our encounters were mediated mainly through hearing and touch. Vision in this exercise has been bracketed to a significant extent, in order to allow the other modes of perception, that are minimised by habitual objectifying potential of vision, to manifest themselves. I will take the opportunity here to reflect upon the ‘problem’ of vision in the context of my Butoh inspired movement explorations. Merleau-Ponty acknowledges the difference between visual and tactile experiences in the following passage:

‘In visual experience, which pushes objectification further than does tactile experience, we can, at least at first sight, flatter ourselves that we constitute the world, because it presents us with a spectacle spread out before us at a distance, and gives us the illusion of being immediately present everywhere and being situated nowhere. Tactile experience, on the other hand, adheres to the surface of our body; we cannot unfold it before us, and it never quite becomes an object. Correspondingly, as the subject of touch, I cannot flatter myself that I am everywhere and nowhere; I cannot forget in this case that it is through my body that I go to the world, and tactile experience occurs “ahead” of me, and is not centered in me. *It is not I who touch, it is my body.*’ (1962: 369; my italics)

It must be admitted that the above position, so strongly marking the difference between ‘I’, ‘subject’ and ‘the body’ is still trapped in the philosophy of consciousness. Merleau-Ponty himself acknowledged this while elaborating his ontology of flesh. In reality I am not a ‘subject of touch’. I am touch. Once my flesh comes into contact with the flesh of the other it I cannot decide not to touch or not to be touched. This also holds true for vision. As soon as I open my eyes I palpate the surfaces around me. In his later work *The Visible and Invisible*,

Merleau-Ponty writes about ‘a relation of pre-established harmony’ between looking and the things looked at, ultimately suggesting that there is a kinship between tactile and visual perception. (1969: 133) Therefore, through vision, my body too adheres to the flesh of the world, as ‘the palpation of the eye’ after all ‘is a remarkable variant’ of the tactile palpation (*ibid.*). And whilst it is true that the philosophy of consciousness always showed a tendency to flatter consciousness, modelled after the sense of vision, as ‘the creator of the world’ it is, as Merleau-Ponty points out even at this stage, an instance of forgetting. We can enact this attitude only ‘at the first sight’. The mutual objectification of the other could only be, as Jorella Andrews, commentator and critic of Merleau-Ponty’s engagement with art, and the author of ‘Vision, Violence and the Other’ (2006) reminds us, ‘a product of thinking and judging that have relinquished their primordial embeddedness in perception.’¹²⁰ Merleau-Ponty states in *Phenomenology of Perception*: ‘[T]he other’s gaze transforms me into an object and mine him only if both of us withdraw into the core of our thinking.’¹²¹

On the other hand it does hold true that touch, dispelling any illusion of distance, anchors me within my body and as a sensation ‘adheres to the surface of my body’. Indeed, Merleau-Pontian descriptions of tactile experience correspond with my own. I felt as though I were coming into contact with an undefined, pulsating, emanating heat, or mass of flesh. Each time, I detected the presence of another life in my vicinity, by listening to the sounds of its inhalations and exhalations (we were discouraged from emitting ‘representational’ sounds like ‘meow’, ‘roar’ or ‘moo, moo’ prior to the encounter, so as not to pretend to be a particular animal, but to allow spontaneous manifestation if the need arose once tactile contact had occurred).

Each encounter with a new creature was accompanied by a certain apprehension. The physical touch was preceded by a careful ‘reconnaissance’ of the other animal’s state, its calmness or agitation, its size, the intensity of what generically is called within Butoh training *ki-energy*. It takes time to traverse the

¹²⁰ Jorella Andrews, “Vision, Violence and the Other: A Merleau-Pontean Ethics,” in *Feminist Interpretations of Maurice Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Dorothea Olkowski and Gail Weiss, pp. 167-182 (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), p. 169

¹²¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), p. 420

initial distance, the gap between two bodies. But the possibility of direct touch is already anticipated by the gentler touch that comes from within that dehiscence and sets a corporeal interaction in motion. The distance between bodies is felt not as a void, but as a space with a certain sensuous quality. This dark space between my own flesh and that of the other, at that stage felt by me only as source of sensorial stimuli, felt more like a fluid. The movement, the heat, the sound of breath from the body of the other stirred the medium filling in the distance between our bodies and sending subtle ripples reaching the shore of my body, my skin. The gentle waves leave ephemeral sensuous reliefs on the surface of my skin, as well as the soft lining of my nostrils and my throat. Together they amount to a certain somatically encoded imprint of the source of these stimuli, which is the flesh of the other living being.

In fact the metaphor of the liquid medium applied to the quality of space may be more than just metaphor. My other experience, that of scuba diving in the Baltic sea, might shed some light on this phenomenon and help us realise the extent to which we take the presence and sensorial ‘neutrality’ of air for granted. The Baltic Sea is a cold sea, located at a relatively high latitude, which prevents it from being inhabited by abundant flora and fauna. Consequently, it lacks the visual richness of coral reefs and other marine life typical of tropical waters. This lack of visual stimuli, however, is conducive to a more attentive observation of our relationship with the medium of water. Water, unlike air, is utterly present to our senses. To start with we cannot ignore the fact that we cannot inhale it, hence are very aware of the boundary between our body and water. The consequence of this is an enhanced inner sense, the feeling of the cavities of the body, which is partly due to the increased pressure of the medium.¹²² Water, owing to its density, resists our movements within it and hence manifests its all-pervasiveness. Owing to its denser structure, both sound and any other vibrations, for instance ripples of three-dimensional waves produced by other scuba divers, are very clearly detected by the skin, even though we do not possess the lateral line that characterises fish, which is extra sensitive to any sort of vibration within water. Finally, since water, to a large extent, neutralises the impact of gravity on

¹²² The pressure 10 meters under the surface of the water is equal to two atmospheres, which is twice as high as the pressure on the surface. Correspondingly diving to a depth of 20 meters exerts pressure on the body three times higher than that on the surface.

our body, we feel that we are supported by this liquid medium, something that we do not experience on land with respect to the air.¹²³ In summary, during the scuba diving experience water became manifest as a corporeal medium, in the very concrete sense of this expression. Every stimulus, be it visual, tactile, auditory etc., was given to me through a direct contact with the medium.

Returning to our encounters as morphing beings; once the newly experienced density of the space between us is fully somatically acknowledged, together with its capacity to transmit corporeal traces of other living beings, our bodies are ready to encroach further into the kinesphere and eventually touch the skin of the other. Initially contact is made with the back of the hand, as it is the safest, least intrusive mode of contact. Then the palms of the hands open themselves to the palpation of another's fingertips. The hands then slowly follow down the forearms and arms, towards the shoulders and the back. Eventually the entire trunk comes into contact; hips touching hips, shoulders touching backs, arms touching legs. What follows could hardly be more accurately rendered in words than in this inspired passage from *The Visible and The Invisible*:

‘For the first time also, my movements no longer proceed unto the things to be seen, to be touched, or unto my own body occupied in seeing and touching them, but they address themselves to the body in general and for itself (whether it be my own or that of another), because for the first time, through the other body, I see that, in its coupling with the flesh of the world, the body contributes more than it receives, adding to the world that I see the treasure necessary for what the other body sees. For the first time, the body no longer couples itself up with the world, it clasps another body, applying [itself to it] carefully with its whole extension, forming tirelessly with its hands the strange statue which in its turn gives everything it receives; the body is lost outside of the world and its goals, fascinated by the unique occupation of floating in Being with another life, of making

¹²³ Unless we are exposed to high winds, or skydive, these experiences would be similar to a particular mode of relationship with the medium of air that characterizes birds. This observation, just as in the earlier reference to the lateral line of fish, and commenting on their general nature, does not aspire to scientific rigor and does not dwell on the intricacies of evolutionary adaptation that characterize a particular species. I hope, however that they are sufficient to demonstrate that there is a continuity and shared principle between species, including human beings, in term of modes of corporeal contact with the surrounding medium.

itself the outside of its inside and the inside of its outside. And henceforth movement, touch, vision, applying themselves to the other and to themselves, return toward their source and, in the patient and silent labour of desire, begin the paradox of expression.’ (1968: 143-144)

Separate bodies intertwine and create what appears to be one mass of sensuality, ‘movement, touch, vision, applying themselves to the other and to themselves.’ (*ibid.*) But, and this cannot be emphasized enough, this experience does not bring about a collapsing together of the other and the self, just as the two touching hands belonging to the same body, are not stripped from their distinctive sensations. Boundaries between the subjects are not erased, although by now Merleau-Ponty prefers to talk of ‘life’ instead of the subject, which in the context of my Butoh dance experience is even more fitting. Fluidity of boundaries, marked by transformations from one distinctive shape to another, is one way of expressing the reciprocity of human beings, animals and inanimate natural entities.

In the notes accompanying his lectures of 1959-1960 Merleau-Ponty declares that it is indeed a concern of his philosophical project ‘to grasp humanity first as another manner of being a body—to see humanity emerge just like being in the manner of a watermark, not as another substance, but as *interbeing*, and not as an imposition of a for-itself on a body in-itself.’ (2003: 208) Elsewhere, in his *Working Notes*, dated November 1960 only four months before his death, in a similar manner he advances a departure in his discourse from the human as the privileged subject, as a *telos* of evolution, writing that ‘Man is not the *end* of the body, nor the organised body the *end* of the components: but rather the subordinated each time slides into the void of a new dimension opened, the lower and the higher gravitate around one another.’ (1968: 265) Here he points towards the *logos* of a self-organisation of the corporeal components which is the same whether it is within the human body or any other body. The ‘man’ is neither the ‘end’, nor the *telos* of the organic world and possibly it not its limit ether. What transpires from this fragment is the privileging of sensorial experience within the intercorporeal matrix. The aforementioned mass of sensuality, the proper name of which in Merleau-Ponty’s ontology would be the flesh, is constituted by multiple folds, gaps and spaces of

divergence. Without the latter characteristics there would be no reversibility, as there will be nothing to reverse to or intertwine with. Since there is reversibility within the matrix of the flesh, 'the patient and silent labour of desire' evolves at the level of the human body and ultimately 'the paradox of expression' is begotten. (1968: 144)

To conclude this section, I would like to draw one more insight from my personal experience of transformation in order to meet the other in space during the course of the Butoh workshop improvisation described. Merleau-Ponty preceded the passage that became pivotal to my critical reflection in this section, with a brief, yet equally significant remark. He commented that opening 'to visions other than our own [...] betray the solipsist illusion that consists in thinking that every going beyond is a surpassing accomplished by oneself.' (1968: 143) Given that Merleau-Ponty advocated an existence of 'exchanges to all the bodies of the same type and of the same style which I see and touch' we could say that this opening up is in essence a lived experience of encountering the other in a profound sense. (*ibid.*) Butoh is not a method of working out philosophical problems such as solipsism. But on this occasion, it provides an experiential background to Merleau-Ponty's statement that 'every going beyond' of our perception of the world is indeed possible only owing to the presence of the other. In the course of the Butoh improvisation it was the bodily reciprocity of 'another life' that enabled 'the paradox of expression.' (*ibid.*) There could be no solipsistic transformation, had it not been reflected, or in fact conditioned by the existence of the other life. Butoh dancers often dance in secluded, empty locations, sometimes at the sites of great natural catastrophes, or acts of genocide. Dancers I have spoken to who do this, such as Atsushi Takenouchi and Itto Morita, report that they never dance alone. Of course one could read a supernatural connotation into this, which in one sense would be in line with the *Shinto* tradition, but I think that the intercorporeal matrix, which also includes animals and plants, is a sufficient explanation of their 'silent and patient labour of desire' giving rise to a 'paradox of expression', which is to say to be fully present with 'another life.'

Kizamu

Memory of Golem.

When I was an infant, I was not able to stand. Unstable and uncertain. It was the 4th step my memory made, that carved into my body.

Memory of death and life.

When I was a child, I got lost inbetween death and life due to a strong asthma spasm. It was the 15th step my memory made, that carved into my body.

Memory of dance with mentally and physically disabled people.

By dancing with them, I felt that a handicap was handicap no more. It was the 53rd step my memory made, that carved into my body.

Memory of intuition.

Through dancing butoh in various places, lands, countries, I felt that all kinds of life forms were dancing. It was the 185th step my memory made, that carved into my body.

This body, with all these memory [*sic*] carved in, is now stepping forward.
What is the step number that I am carving now, this moment...

Atsushi Takenouchi¹²⁴

4.6.3 Spectator's transformation

Atsushi Takenouchi's solo performance titled *Ki Za Mu* (2005) staged at the Cultural Centre Klub 'Zak', Gdansk, Poland during the Butoh festival 'Poland-Japan: Dialogue of Cultures', offered me, as a member of the audience, a rare opportunity to experience what Merleau-Ponty called a 'postural impregnation',¹²⁵ and what contemporary researchers investigate under the

¹²⁴ Text from the on-line pamphlet accompanying *Ki Za Mu*, JINEN's solo Butoh performance. The premiere of this piece took place in the Dance theatre dB (Osaka, Japan) in Feb 2005. It was subsequently staged at the: Chisenhale Dance Space (London) / May 2005, Teatr KANA (Szczecin, Poland) / Nov 2005, Espace Culturel Bertin Poiree (Paris Butoh festival 2006) / June 2006, Theater for the New City (New York Butoh festival 2007) / Nov 2007 and others. Information along with an edited sample of the video recording taken in Teatr KANA (Szczecin, Poland) available on: http://www.jinen-butoh.com/works/KIZAMU_e.html

¹²⁵ As already explained in Chapter 2 (Section: Intercorporeality) this is a term that Merleau-Ponty borrowed from Henry Wallon, who employed it to explain the ability of infants to mimic, and in doing so understand the gestures of adults long before they learn to understand language. Merleau-Ponty states 'The child's own body is for him a way of understanding other bodies through "postural impregnation."' (CRO: 150). These findings were first published in: Wallon, Henry. *Les origines du caractère chez l'enfant*. (Bibliothèque de la Revue des cours et conférences) Paris, Boivin, 1934.

headline of 'kinesthetic empathy.'¹²⁶ I witnessed this performance at the end of a week-long intensive Butoh workshop led by Atsushi Takenouchi, which culminated in a group performance by eight participants, including me. I am convinced that the rigorous training of the preceding days and the intensity of my own performance, titled 'Mandala of Life of Death', set my body-mind in a particularly receptive state and prepared my body-mind to incorporate the essence of this powerful performance.

The Japanese title of this piece *Ki Za Mu* translates into English as 'to carve an experience into one's body'. This meaning, significantly, was not known to me until a couple years after I had seen the performance, but exactly captures the essence of my experience, or rather of what 'was experienced' within me during the course of the performance. Takenouchi's dance 'carved out' his experience in my body's own experience.

The performance, as presented in Gdansk, lasted around sixty-five minutes. On that occasion, Takenouchi danced to an accompaniment of his artistic partner Hiroko Komiya, a multi-instrumentalist who created a soundscape using stone, water, bamboo, metal balls, bells, percussion and voice. On this occasion Atsushi performed naked from the outset, save for a white loin cloth (*fudoshi*), and he was covered with white Butoh make up.

His dance began on the floor, in a foetus-like position. A dim spotlight directed on his back revealed the subtlest of muscular movements responding to the internal expansion and contraction of his lungs. It is this first function of inhaling and exhaling that underlines our unceasing transaction with the external world and questions our separation. With each inhalation we are filled with the world, touched by the world, and this life-giving touch extends to the very centre of each cell of our body. Similarly, it was through the dance of the lungs, that the

¹²⁶Kinesthetic empathy is defined as 'kinesthetic and emotional responses resulting from watching the movement of another.' The 'Watching Dance: Kinesthetic Empathy' research programme used audience research and neuroscience to explore how dance spectators respond to and identify with dance. It was funded by a grant from the AHRC (Arts and Humanities Research Council) from 1 April 2008 to Summer 2011. The main questions it asked were: To what extent do spectators of dance internally simulate the movement observed? What conditions favour empathetic responses? What are the roles of social engagement and emotional response in kinesthetic empathy? It was a multidisciplinary project, involving collaboration across four institutions (University of Manchester, University of Glasgow, York St John University and Imperial College London).

humanoid, fleshy form of Takenouchi's body was expressing its desire to live and dance. With time, the ripples of muscular contractions and relaxations spread through the rest of the body, animating individual articulations and eventually all of its limbs in a seemingly unrelated pattern. Even before a rudimentary degree of movement, organisation had connected individual sections of the body, some other parts having reached a sense of vertical orientation trying to extend upwards. It took time for a coordinated effort of the whole body to slowly lift itself from the ground on wobbly legs but with feet already certain of its special connection with the ground. Perhaps this was analogous to that '4th step', referred to above, that was carved into the body of Takenouchi.

In hindsight and with my later acquired knowledge of Takenouchi's poem, I can recognise the images, gestures, movements and faces that his poem announced and which I witnessed within the structure of the performance. But I was not aware of it at the time of watching it live. What I slowly started to become aware of, however, was a distinct sensation that was growing in my own body. It corresponded with Takenouchi's slow progression as he walked across the stage towards the audience, a walk filled with enormous physical effort, His facial expression was blank, but his eyes projected a mixture of fear and determination. Every now and again his body jerked violently as if in response to a shot. On a couple of occasions the power of what seemed to be an invisible bullet threw his body to the ground. But each time his absent, alienated body got up and carried on forward, traversing a space that seemed to be dense with hostility and physically obstructive. At that point I observed that my torso had tensed, my breathing had become shallow and rapid, and my heart was pounding in my chest. It was a reaction of fear. As minutes or perhaps only seconds passed I realised that my hands had begun to move involuntarily. They were rotating at the wrist, while my fingers were stretching and contracting in turn. Proprioceptively the range of these movements felt enormous, as if my entire torso and both arms were involved in their execution. I clearly felt the spaces between my articulations. It seemed to me that I was projecting my whole body into the space between Takenouchi and myself. In a way I felt that the flesh of my body had become rarefied and had expanded. The sensorial faculties of my body emigrated beyond the boundaries of my skin. It was an ecstatic sensation.

There were also other dimensions to this state. My felt openness, the amplified permissiveness of my psychosomatic boundaries, made me feel vulnerable. I felt as though I had been turned inside out. In my usual waking state it is my intention that ‘wanders’ outside of body without making me feel that I am being exposed, and keeping my desire for contact private. I can observe another person from a distance, without needing to come up close, to touch him or her, or to make my perceptual engagement obvious in any way. Most importantly, in my experience of being a white, male European living in the country respecting human rights, I can look generally at a person without fearing that his or her bodily action would alter my own kinesthetic organisation without my consent.¹²⁷ This was the source of the horror that emerged as the *Ki Za Mu* performance reached its conclusion. I was losing conscious control over the movements of my own body movements. It felt that I was open to whatever impulse would be generated by Takenouchi’s slowly walking body. This realisation shocked and scared me; I felt that my body was possessed.

By the end of the performance I was entirely overwhelmed by a paralysis of my whole body-mind. And in this case the expression body-mind is particularly apt, as I could not distinguish between them, as I was submerged in a sort of catatonic state. When the performance finished and the theatre hall emptied, I was still sitting in my chair. Eventually I regained enough strength, or command over my body, to go back stage to meet the artist. I had to wait for around ten minutes for Atsushi Takenouchi to emerge from his changing room, after he removed his make up and showered. When he came out I thanked him and, as we were already well acquainted after the second workshop, we embraced each other. In that instance I felt as if an electric current ran through my body, and that I regained self-control. I had been returned to myself, with my boundaries re-established.

¹²⁷ There are instances when, either clearly aggressive, threatening bodily comportment or an affectionate, gentle interaction between two sentient beings (I feel that that applies both to animals and human beings) can change the subject’s proprioceptive state, including his or her kinesthesia. The examples of the first would be an instinctive curling up and tensing of the whole musculature in advance of a physical attack by the stronger aggressor. The other would be softening of the infant body when soothed by the mother. But all those scenarios include a direct interaction between the subjects. In the case described by me, I was just one of the members of the audience and Atsushi Takenouchi never made any gesture, or other action to establish a special relationship with me during the course of the performance.

My experience was as powerful as it was unsettling. Only in the course of my research I discovered reports from other audience members of Butoh performances who have had strikingly similar experiences. Nanako Kurihara, in her doctoral dissertation titled *The Most Remote Thing in the Universe: Critical Analysis of Hijikata Tatsumi's Butoh Dance* (1996) quoted a testimony by the Japanese dance critic Miura Masashi, later editor-in-chief of the Japanese Dance Magazine, who reported an experience in his article 'Hijikata Tatsumi no kyōfu' [Fear of Hijikata Tatsumi] that culminated in bodily sensations akin to my own:

'I have seen a performance by Hijikata Tatsumi. To be more accurate, I saw him go across a stage. Taking a very long time, a body moved across the stage diagonally. I could see the air on the stage increasing its density, turning to water, and then oil. Once in a while, his subtle hand and foot movements changed the air into sand. The air turned into sand from the edge of his hand and feet. The sand spread like dominoes, covering the stage... I am watching something extraordinary, I thought, as I clasped my sweaty hands together.' (1996: 43)

He then added that he felt that 'some unknown force had completely taken over his body and mind and began trembling. He mumbled to himself, "What is this? What is this?"' (1996: 44) Kurihara claims that Miura's description accurately conveys Hijikata's extraordinary presence, which many others have also noted. It had been frequently reported that in performance, he dominated the space and affected his spectators physically.

Later in her thesis Kurihara shares her own experiences, providing further evidence that Butoh dance masters, with their exceptional stage presence developed over the course of many years of training, produce a kinesthetic empathy or postural impregnation; the most spectacular manifestation of intercorporeality in their audiences. I will quote at length:

'Although I myself never had the opportunity to see Hijikata perform, I had a similar powerful experience while watching Ashikawa Uzumi of Hokutōbō dance at Saint Mark's Church in New York in 1990. In one scene, Ashikawa wore a long, white, ragged costume. She receded

slowly backward with her face tilted up slightly, her eyes closed, and a quiet, ecstatic expression over her face. She looked absolutely unself-conscious. I felt a tremendous presence, beyond any daily life consciousness, emanating from her. When her extended arms moved forward slightly, I suddenly felt a wind blowing from her across the space toward me and distinctly felt a breeze. Everything but Ashikawa receded into background. The distance between her and me disappeared; I felt her simultaneously far away and directly in front of me. At the moment, time seemed to stand still. Some invisible force was affecting me in a very powerful way, slipping me, for a moment, into what was a pleasurable, satisfying feeling. I felt that I had somehow touched another dimension within myself – a world I had not known existed. It was a *transformational experience communicated from body to body*, transcending merely visual images. It was this extraordinary, mysterious experience that Hijikata was constantly aspiring to.’ (1996, 44-45: my emphasis)

Kurihara’s experience had a soothing quality. My experience, which was similar to that of Miura Masashi, tapped into fear, feelings of vulnerability and caused nearly a physical paralysis. All three, however, were characterized by deep somatic reactions and, first and foremost, a sense of interconnection with the dancer. The affective content provoked by the proprioceptive changes must have depended on the kinesthetic and proprioceptive state of the respective dancers, which in turn most likely corresponded with the theme of the dance. I need to stress that I did not read the pamphlet accompanying Takenouchi’s performance, but clearly the corporeal transfer, or the field of intercorporeality in Nagatomo terminology, in my case contained traces of the atmosphere of violence and fear. I recognized the scene of persecution and shooting, which was also one the leading images of our improvisations during the preceding workshop. Hence, it appears that in my case the particular corporeal schema was already stored, and the bodily memory, that is ‘reflexive-but-unreflected’ in M.C. Dillon’s terms, was activated. (1998: 122)

It was also Dillon, who in his analysis of Merleau-Ponty’s work on transfer of corporeal schema, concluded that, although the infant’s goal is to

establish a distinct bodily self, the realm of syncretic sociability is never entirely left behind. Dillon was stressing the positive aspect of the enduring sense of 'fundamental human community.' (1998: 124) Similarly Kleinberg-Levin saw the possibility of recovering 'the marvellous experience of prepersonal intercorporeality that appropriates the life of the infant.' (2008: 191) Perhaps Kuriharas' experience belonged to this realm as she described it as 'a pleasurable, satisfying feeling.' (1996: 45) It should come as no surprise that the phenomenon of intercorporeality could result in sensations of both darkness and fear as well as calming and pleasurable feelings, just as can be explored in Butoh practice.

In conclusion, I would like to briefly summarise the trajectory of the last section. I started by describing our familiar everyday landscape, the ground in its various, sometimes 'domesticated', sometimes natural forms. Firstly we brought the essence of our embodied relationship into contact with the sensuous surface of our planet. This experiential exploration within the context of Butoh practice brought us to acknowledge an always existing, although often unreflected connection with the depths of the ground.

Later I explored the possibilities for transformation and new modes of encounter with 'another life', when our human subjectivity is suspended and a new corporeal schema is developed. In describing the course of a movement improvisation, we realised that our body has the potential for metamorphosis. This metamorphosis was enabled by a new pattern of breathing and by shifting the interactions between the senses. All this permitted us to achieve a state of body-mind that allowed us to meet another life while being aware of the distinctiveness of each other and, at the same time, as being chiasmically connected, interdependent beings, manifestations of the same flesh of the world.

Finally, I reflected upon the transfer of the corporeal schema in the context of my relationship with a Butoh dancer during a live performance. What followed was a phenomenological description of his dance, which itself followed the matrix of intercorporeal relationship with the ground and space and even with a suggested corporal transfer across time. Atsushi Takenouchi's performance was based on his personal memories. In the culmination of this section I have

described the effects of the transfer of corporeal schema onto my body-mind. Finally, I compared my experience with that of other members of the public, who were competent individuals in the Butoh audience. This allowed me to make particular points about the nature of transfer of corporeal schema in the context of a Butoh dance performance.

CONCLUSION

This thesis is devoted to an interpretation of the notion of intercorporeality, which was introduced by Maurice Merleau-Ponty in the last period of his philosophical activity. The specificity of the approach taken in this research lay in the selection of Japanese Butoh dance as a point of reference from which to examine the experiential aspects of intercorporeality. Significantly, therefore, this project was informed by the actual practice of Butoh, as well as particular somatic practices, undertaken by the author prior to the start of the research and alongside the research project. As such it has both an interdisciplinary and intercultural character. Therefore, in the course of the thesis an effort is made to provide to the reader with the necessary cultural context of Butoh as an artistic practice and of Japanese views on the body-world interaction.

There is a chiasmic relation between my interpretation of the ontology of flesh and my practice-informed engagement with Butoh dance. Over the course of my research the notion of intercorporeality and Flesh opened a crucial dimension through which Butoh could be explored. Butoh also presented itself as a privileged practice through which the notion of intercorporeality operating with the matrix of flesh could be investigated through an inherent ethos of corporeal reciprocity.

Merleau-Ponty's ontology of flesh is not conceived as a substitute, or even a partial substitute, for science. It is rather a distinct paradigm, which understands our being in the world from the experiential perspective. It was of course erected within the edifice of the entire Western philosophical tradition, hence it bears its many terminological signatures, terms and concepts, and has to refer to these in order to reinterpret or denounce them and – significantly – in order to propose new ones. Crucially, however, the ontology of flesh moves along a diverted, perhaps marginal trajectory of Western philosophy. Merleau-Ponty strived to express a content and dynamic of experience that is essential for the artist, not only as a producer of cultural artifacts but foremost as a medium for transubstantiation occurring in his or her actual body, 'not the body as a chunk of space or a bundle of functions but that body which is an intertwining of vision and movement.' (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 162). For this reason he continually transgressed boundaries of philosophical language,

and installed his bodily self in the same scenery which Klee, Cézanne and other painters saw, inhabited with their body-minds and ‘painted’ on their canvas.¹²⁸

Merleau-Ponty’s writing is very suggestive, not to say seductive. But this style does not eradicate doubts. Can the ontology of flesh with its far reaching consequences decentring the western, epistemological concept of the (humanist) ‘subject’ and emphasising instead an anonymous, pre-personal basis of existence and its continuity, be truly experienced? If this intercorporeal connection is a primordial given state which opens us to the world, why do we so often we feel isolated from the things, not to mention the other subjects, which surround us? What did we alienate ourselves from in the natural world?

In attempting to answer these questions, it is useful to expand the field of investigation. It is also useful to expand the cultural sphere in order to provide an indication that the ontology of flesh could have a validity going further than the Western world, which is, paradoxically, still dominated by a dualism of body and mind, matter and spirit.

Butoh dance presents itself as a field where these questions can be given a wider context and answers can be sought in a process where the actual body can resonate with the flesh of the world. Indeed I consider Butoh as a dance of hope in many senses. It is a hope evoked in a twofold sense. It is hope that we can, despite our vulnerability and carnality – often marked by imposed, or chosen but not tolerated identities and impaired physical abilities – affirm our existence. Butoh, while recognising our weaknesses, strives to recover the innocent joy of participating in the miracle of existence, of partaking in the spectacle of the whole Being, confirming our being-of-the-world within the world in every manifestation.

It also holds out hope of recovering the interpersonal being. It is a way of being in which we confirm our connection with others before and beyond concrete social and cultural conditions; our sense of belonging. We can never deny the formative impact of these forces on us and our relationships with others; but we should not categorically pose any cultural and social limitations on our interpersonal life because of their relative and changeable character.

Butoh is a celebration and exploration of our embodied existence as always being with others, and presents the possibility of opening to the other, whoever or

¹²⁸ Sadly nothing is known about Merleau-Ponty’s actual artistic and somatic practices.

whatever this other is. Butoh, through developing a higher sense of fluid corporeality, enables us to explore the otherness of the other without appropriation, that is, it allows us to live through and cast away our prejudices, ultimately establishing new ways of being with any form of life. The ‘other’ could be another gender; another race; another species; or another form of being, including unanimated forms of life such as stones, animated forms of nature, for example plants and animals, or even the products of our technological development such as robots and cyborgs. This is why our intersubjectivity, in the near future, will have to return to the domain of the intercorporeal being, to its primordial source.

The following statement of Merleau-Ponty from *The Visible and the Invisible*, although meant to frame his notion of hyperreflection, captures the phenomenon of Butoh dance from another angle. It is the figure of the Butoh dancer who performs an interrogation of Being in the terms described above. Butoh dance is an interrogation of entities within the field of intercorporeality that not only has an ontological dimension but is also an epistemological condition of contact as such. Merleau-Ponty writes:

‘The effective, present, ultimate and primary being, the thing itself, are in principle apprehended in transparency through their perspectives, offer themselves therefore only to someone who wishes not to have them but to see them, not to hold them as with forceps or to immobilize them as under the objective of a microscope, but to let them be and to witness their continued being –to someone who therefore limits himself to giving them the hollow, the free space they ask for in return, the resonance they require, who follows their own movement, who is therefore not a nothingness the full being would come to stop up, but a question consonant with the porous being which it questions and from which it obtains not an answer, but a confirmation of its astonishment.’ (1968: 101-102)

The cultural context of Butoh as a revolutionary form of art is important, hence the necessary analysis of its socio-cultural background and Hijikata’s engagement with the issues of gender and sexuality. But beyond that Butoh dance has the potential to unify the personal and the pre-personal. It is a contemporary example of the ancient Eastern idea of self-cultivation, unifying

practice and theory, conceiving our body as the very locus of our intimate, corporeal relationship with the world – intercorporeality.

I am not under the illusion that I have exhausted the theme of intercorporeality as it manifests itself across the entire *oeuvre* of Merleau-Ponty's ontology of flesh. Towards the end of his work 'The Intertwining – The Chiasm' Merleau-Ponty indicates, as the most difficult aspect of his nascent theory, that language is also implicated in the Flesh of the world. This opening still awaits its elaboration. It could, in fact, be taken up once again in dialogue with the question of the status of language in Butoh dance. Kurihara, a dance critic and author of *Hijikata Tatsumi. The Words of Butoh* (2000) wrote 'Despite being a man of the body, words were essential to Hijikata. [...] A tremendous number of words surround his dance.' (2000: 14). This research would involve an analysis and interpretation of *butoh-fu*, written in the poetic language of records of choreographic ideas.

On the other hand, dedicated research into the ethical implications of intercorporeality emerging at the junction of somatic practice in general and Butoh dance in particular would further complement my investigations.

The third idea which could follow the trajectory of this research would be an examination of Merleau-Ponty's later thinking in dialogue with the practice of European physical theatre, notably the practice of Jerzy Grotowski and his notion of theatre as vehicle, and the contemporary practice of Thomas Richards, who continued Grotowski's work in Pontadera, Italy.

Moreover, I am aware that the very concept of intercorporeality is open to further criticism, particularly when wider social and political issues would be pivotal to research in the field. The notions of identity, subjectivity and the mind and body are very much at the core of the contemporary debate, which is in constant flux due to the process of changing paradigms. I am aware that the notion of intercorporeality, as presented in this research, is much more readily acceptable in traditional Japanese philosophy derived from Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism.

Ultimately, however, my research was focused on a very particular artistic phenomenon. My predominant interest lies in the exploration of concrete somatic interactions with aspects of the sensible world that we do not often notice: the relationship with the ground, with space, and with human beings when their social roles have been weakened or bracketed. I hope that this thesis provides a vivid and reflective record of these intercorporeal encounters.

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