

Old, weak, and invalid: dance in inaction

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Aging Body in Dance* – there should be various paths to tackle with this inspiring and yet difficult theme. Strictly speaking, aging covers the entire life process, as every one of us has been “aging” ever since we came into the world. My topic for today’s talk, however, addresses a possible relationship between seniors, people of real old age, and dance, that is, between the time when you are about to leave this world and the art of dancing.

Anna Halprin says, on the occasion of her project *Seniors Rocking* (2005), “I wanted to work with people my own age and deal with issues that seniors deal with.... I fuss around about death and dying in my mind.”¹ *Seniors Rocking* can be discussed in the context of a so-called new genre of public art, a community based art, and, of course, a community dance, in which empowerment, inclusion, visibility, and all the issues of social welfare seem most valued. And yet, at the same time, something else also seems to have happened. I quote Janice Ross:

“We are considered seniors – people who are ‘done’”, a seventy-nine-year-old woman tells the recording crew after the performance. “But we are the next generation. Anna has given us an opportunity to just let it go. We aren’t accepting cultural expectations for what we should do.” Another woman fastens on the metaphoric power of the rocking chair: “There was a special moment as I was saying good-bye to the rocking chairs that I realized it was a symbol of my life,” she says, referring to the final moment in the dance when each elder rose from her or his chair, placed a flower on the seat, and slowly walked away. “There was sadness, depression but also joy,” she continues. “I know now I would like to be able to celebrate dying the way I celebrate life. That’s a gift that Anna has.”²

Needless to say, I have nothing opposed to the first one but only full of respect and sympathy, and yet, what intrigues me more is this statement of “another woman.” Sadness, depression but also joy – What is it? How can you celebrate dying the way you celebrate life? Or even before beginning to ask this, I wonder, how do I know the reality of those “seniors” (or people fatally ill or “challenged”) living already in anticipation the moment of dying? These are the questions recurring in my mind when I glimpse at the issues of an aging body, since my interest lies in a certain linkage that art might have with the practice of medicine in its broadest sense, which includes issues of *ars vivendi* (arts of living) and, inevitably, issues of thanatology, how to cope with one’s own process of dying. Therein matters not only art as therapy but art as thanatology.

While dancing could function as a powerful support, a companion, for those who are about to go through the ultimate transition from life to death, it seems less obvious that this stage of life, right

¹ Janice Ross, *Anna Halprin: Experience as Dance* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 2007), 354.

² *Ibid.*, 356.

before the transition, could offer something, something crucial to dancing. Dancing is good for old people, good for aging, and perhaps vice versa, aging is good for dancing, too! My focus in this paper, therefore, is what aging can do for dancing, rather than what dancing can do for aging. Old people dance well, *not despite the fact that they are old, but because they are old*. This proposition has been often regarded as a matter of cultural differences – different traditions, concepts, and value systems, regarding dance and the dancers. True, such differences need to be carefully examined, and yet I would like to suggest a locus of discussion open to diverse practices across different times, places, and cultures, with an emphasis on a part of the legacies of American postmodern dance as well as non-Western somatic practices. Which I hope is justifiable to some degree if one looks at the historical context where the Judson group came to be formed.

Around the 1960s, when the medium-specificity of modernist art began to lose its canonical status, a *generic* notion of Art presented itself as a common basis for new art forms interacting closely with each other.³ Conventional craftsmanship, which embodied intelligence and skillful bodies faded away. The artist's primary capital for *poiesis* became no longer accumulated within her/his own body, as a physically internalized technique, but more and more externalized in the form of technology. On the other hand, according to Sally Banes, “‘a decidedly anthropological turn of mind’ occurred during the same period, bringing about the era of counterculture in the late ’60s, during which bodily cultures from different sources emerged (the martial arts of T’ai Chi Chu’uan, karate, aikido, and of course the widely practiced Zen Buddhism).”⁴ Additionally, practices of what we now call “somatics”, namely, various kinds of body work, therapy, meditation methods developed as well (‘The Feldenkreis Method,’ ‘The Alexander Technique,’ ‘Kinesiology,’ ‘Release Work,’ to name but a few). It was also the era of the psychedelic, of the altered state of consciousness experienced widely and perhaps too easily via drugs. All political issues concerning the “natural” (and sexual) body must also be taken into account. Although these conflicting problems make it difficult to generalize, somehow and sometime, the body was rediscovered then as “a conscious body that imbued corporeal experience with metaphysical significance, uniting head and body, mind and gut,”⁵ and seems to have indicated the stream towards a non-dualistic perception of the mental and the physical, which is in fact very much characteristic of Zen philosophy, along with other psychosomatic spiritual training.

Referring to those cross-cultural and inter-media situations, I would like to foreground, eventually, bodies of ordinary old people, rather than those extraordinary people of old age (like “living national treasures” in Japan), and see if not just “unglamorous, or unenhanced” but conspicuously disabled and declining bodies have anything to tell us about the art of dancing.

³ See Thierry de Duve, “The Monochrome and the Black Canvas,” in *Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris, and Montreal 1945-1964*, ed. Serge Guilbaut (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1990), 248-250.

⁴ Sally Banes, *Greenwich Village 1963* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 247. Also see Minoru Tada, *Bukkyou Touzen: Taiheiyou wo watatta bukkyou [Buddhism spreading eastward: Buddhism crossed over the Pacific Ocean]* (Kyoto: Zenbunka kenkyujo, 1990).

⁵ Banes, *ibid.*, 235.

1) Dancers = mediums? (Bodies receiving and listening)

“Dancing is something that comes to you,” says Mika Kurosawa, a Japanese contemporary dancer, “it is not the performance of dance.”⁶ Statements of this kind, often found in the discourses of first-rate dancers at any time or place, reminds us of the ancient idea of dance as a heavenly gift, not man-made but brought by divine or super-natural interference, and dancers such as shamans who mediate between this world and the other world. Such conceptions survive even today, forming what might be called a genealogy of a neo-pre-Modernist position in the field of dance.⁷

Yan Li-ping, a Chinese contemporary dancer from an ethnic minority, subscribes to what her grandmother used to tell her, that is, “you dance to have a chat with gods”. Tatsumi Hijikata talked again and again about a mediumistic stage of a Butoh dancer in terms of, say, “non-human power,” “the possessed state,” “no distance from things around you” etc., and perceived his own body as a locus for people other than himself, particularly for the people who are deceased, to cohabite and to teach him how to dance. “A Butoh-dancing vehicle is a vehicle which invites Butoh,” he stated, “in either way, the vehicle must be always kept empty.”⁸ Kazuo Ohno also repeatedly used the phrase, “the blessings of the dead.” Mentioning Noh dream theater which features primarily departed spirits and ghosts, he says, “in my case, I’m not imitating the dead as if they were alive; rather, I would like to dance, keeping it deep in my mind that I live with them, walk with them, fully immersed in the blessings of the dead.”⁹ Whether divinity or apparition, something other than you, more than you, takes over, so that you must let go, at least partially, a conscious control of your own body, getting into a trance, a state of ecstasy. Struck by Pina Bausch’s outrageously powerful performance, a folklorist Syuhei Kikkawa relates it to automatic and convulsive movements observable in shamanism, an expressive power of which he trusts should be essential to any successful dance performance.¹⁰

If this is the case, I mean, if you have to be in a state of “possession” – “inspired,” “captured,” or driven by forces beyond your conscious self in order for dance to come, to enter you, is dance nothing but an art of the lunatic, as so believed commonly in ancient societies? Having lost the fertility and

⁶ Mika Kurosawa, “Expressing Oneself Physically,” in *Japanese Contemporary Dance Media 2005*, an Exhibition catalogue (Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography, 2005), 196, 69 [translation from Japanese is mine](= abbreviated as [TM] in the following pages).

⁷ The “neo-pre-Modernism” is a term suggested by art theorist Thomas MacEvelly, in his “Medicine Man: Proposing a Context for Wolfgang Laib’s Work,” *PARKETT no.39*, 1994, 104-108. In addition, according to some Japanese dance historians, the generic term for “dance” in Japanese, “*buyou*,” didn’t exist until the late Meiji period. “Buyou” is a coinage constituted by two elements, “*bu* = *mai*” and “*you* = *odori*”, and in classical Japanese dance they do differentiate these two elements or aspects of dance. While “*odori*” is meant to be a theatrical spectacle offered to the audience and fellow human beings (like *Kabuki-odori*), they say, “*mai*” originated from shamanistic activities for getting in touch with divine, or super human entities. See, for instance, Kazuko Tsurumi, Suzusi Hanayagi, and Senrei Nishikawa, *Odori wa jinsei [Dancing is Living]* (Tokyo: Fujiwara-shoten, 2003), 76-80, and Masakatsu Gunji, *Odori no Bigaku [Aesthetics of Dance]* (Tokyo: Engeki-syuppannsya, 1957), 127-130. These aspects – theater and ritual, horizontal and vertical communications – are, if intertwined, still present in the core of dance practices.

⁸ Tatsumi Hijikata, “Seishin to nikutai: yojigen no butoh [Mind and Body: Butoh of Four Dimensions],” in *Hijikata Tatsumi Zenshu I [The Complete Works of Tatsumi Hijikata I]* (Tokyo: Kawade-Shobo-Shinsha, 2005) 238-239 [TM].

⁹ Kazuo Ohno, *Keiko no Kotoba [Words of Workshop]* (Tokyo, Film-Art-sha, 1997), 53 [TM].

¹⁰ Syuhei Kikkawa, “Nihon no dentou buyou: Pina Bausch tonos setten [Traditional Dance in Japan: a Point It Can Meet Pina Bausch],” in *Japanese Contemporary Dance Media 2005*, 98-99.

multi-functionality it would enjoy in pre-modern context, madness is already largely demythologized in the discourses of medical science, and “possession” is now explained as a symptom of ‘integration dysfunction syndrome.’ It may sound a spooky anachronism then to insist that dance is a channel to go to another world, unless one can prove that we share a belief system of the same kind even in this totally secularized era.

And yet, these neo-pre-Modernist discourses indicate a very basic condition of dance – what is happening to dancing bodies and how they experience the dancing state from within. Dancers’ subjective experience is the key here. It must feel different when dance comes and when it doesn’t, when their conscious selves melt and expand and when they stay as they are. Not much depending upon what they think of gods, spirits, supernatural beings, or the world other than this world, they do seem to know “this is it.” And, as we are going to see in a few more cases, for dance to come, to enter them, they state that they need to be “empty,” “let go control,” and get into a certain characteristic state – relaxed and alert at once, untroubled and highly receptive, in other words, a state of deep concentration induced by simple and often rather minimal body movements and deliberate self-observation.

Could this, I wonder, be considered as a renewed terminology for a mediumistic/shamanistic and trance-like state of “possession,” retelling those ancient mythologies for dancing bodies in a modern fashion? If so, it might be relevant not just to Butoh people, Noh actors, or non-Western relatively “primitive” dancers, but also to postmodern and contemporary dancers, as long as they value improvisatory, spontaneous, out of control movement. As I mentioned before, while Judson dancers distanced themselves from the assumptions of mainstream Western art-dance (ballet and modern dance) altogether, quite a few of them approached other alternative body techniques, including non-Western traditional ones or non-artistic therapeutic ones, both of which lay emphasis on “bodily awareness” and experiencing your own body internally.¹¹ It might be noteworthy here that before (and after) Robert Dunn’s composition class in New York, its core members (Simore Forti, Trisha Brown, Yvonne Rainer, Steve Paxton) participated in Halprin’s Workshop in the West Coast. According to Forti, a “dance state,” a “state of enchantment,” that they learned from Halprin in the workshop requires “concentrated self-witnessing”:¹²

Sometimes it would be a matter of doing an activity that would set you up or help you induce the dance state. It could be just walking around in a circle and focusing on the sensations in your body. The sensation of one part moving against another. Of momentum – of different parts, of the mass. And being satisfied to stay focused on those sensations for – oh, fifteen minutes. And then a lot of impulses start to come.

Maybe I could compare it to certain meditational states, or state in which you arrive at certain concentration and then it’s not an effort to do what you’re concentrating on doing, because your whole system is flowing in that direction. You’re acting almost – I wouldn’t say in a state of

¹¹ Ramsay Burt, *Judson Dance Theater: Performative Traces* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), p.57.

¹² *Ibid.*, 61.

no-mind, but your system is geared to *performing*. It could be adrenalin, it could be theta waves, it could be what Castaneda writes about: a state the warrior can be into where his powers are awakened.¹³

Such “meditational” “dance state” (or a “musical state”) in which “all your motor intelligence is blossoming”¹⁴ was thus valued as a preliminary state for improvisation or dance composition. Among dancers related to Judson, however, it was also perhaps more commonly understood as a method effective in “entering a zone,” so to speak, a condition to achieve a satisfying performance (satisfying not necessarily to the audience, but to the dancers themselves as they experience it internally).¹⁵ In such representative pieces of the Judson group as *Mind Is A Muscle* (Rainer) and *Accumulation* (Brown), their “neutral” doings of tasks or task-like movements with no attention-catching dance technique could be to some degree comparable to a moving meditation, which is to clear the head, calm down and tame the mind through cultivating bodily awareness. These bodies are not so much expressive or talkative as they are receptive, and thus foreground the function of receiving, or “listening.” If we follow the perception of Deborah Hay, who is another exemplary case, after working with Cunningham and the Judson group, she joined a T’ai Chi Chu’uan class, through which she discovered and developed her bodily awareness, skin sensation and a sense of “cosmic” flow. With simple breathing exercises, Hay realized how subtle movements could affect a state of consciousness.¹⁶ Bill Jeffers once commented on her outdoor solo performance, adopting a sort of Taoist terminology: “she becomes empty and the dance enters her.” “The process of emptying, of becoming hollow and then listening *is* the dance that Deborah does.”¹⁷

Quieting and emptying the mind, getting to the egoless, untroubled state of mind that is responsive even to the subtlest change of energy, and just being in flow with it – so as to get your system “geared to *performing*.” This can be a method applicable to all those ordinary bodies, walking, running, standing, and doing whatever constitutes our ordinary life. Hay could say, therefore, “The dance is any moment when I am clearly in the act of doing just what I am doing.”¹⁸

2) Not alienated by the eyes: somaesthesia as a tool

¹³ Quoted in Sally Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers: Post-Modern Dance* [Revised second edition] (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1987), 23-24, 34.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁵ We may recall a meditational aspect of the Cunningham approach, as Gus Solomon jr reported that he learned “to dance from stillness,” from “inner calm,” while “Graham dancers would get themselves into a state of high anxiety to dance well.” Gus Solomon jr, “Dancing in New York,” in *Reinventing dance in the 1960s*, ed. Sally Banes (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 109.

¹⁶ Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers*, 113-130.

¹⁷ Bill Jeffers, “Leaving the House; The Solo Performance of Deborah Hay,” *The Drama Review* 23, T 81 (1971), 79-86.

¹⁸ Quoted in Bill Jeffers, *ibid.*, 80. Also see the edited transcript of an interview with Deborah Hay, in *Contemporary Dance*, ed. Anne Livet (New York: Abbeville Press, Inc., 1978), 122-130. For an empty, “untroubled mind” as a condition to receive “inspiration” in the art context, see, for instance, Agnes Martin, *Writing/Schriften*, ed. Dieter Schwarz (Winterthur: Kunstmuseum Winterthur/Cantz, 1992); “It is an untroubled mind. Of course we know that an untroubled state of mind cannot last. So we say that inspiration comes and goes but really it is there all the time waiting for us to be untroubled again”(62).

The above-mentioned approach to arriving at the “dance state” seems to have been incorporated into Steve Paxton’s basic exercises for Contact Improvisation, a method for duet (or group) dance which is now well-known and practiced world-wide, originated by Paxton with various sources, including his own encounter with aikido as well as his experiments with some of the former Judson colleagues. What interests me here is the “stand” exercise (or “small dance” as he later named it), that is, simply “standing and observing the body.” Paxton wrote:

Standing still is not actually “still.” Balancing on two legs demonstrates to the dancer’s body that one moves with gravity, always. Observing the constant adjustments the body makes to keep from falling calms the whole being. It is a meditation.¹⁹

It is therefore not so much about giving attention to kinesthetic sensations when we move around explicitly as about concentrating on even subtler somatic sensations, “our feeling of the muscles of the body when they are quiet, or *the sense of ‘being’*, if I may propose such a sense,” through which one would come to learn that, as Paxton says, “the consciousness can travel inside the body.” In the entire process of improvising, too, “the consciousness was to hang in with the body, during real time, and stay alert. It should be a witness.”²⁰

The exploration of this “awareness of the present physical reality,” of keeping the mind relaxed and alert by observing infinitesimal changes that simple bodily movement brings about so as to be most receptive, attentive to the body’s present moment, the space around it, and gravity affecting it – this meditational state will lead you where to go, how to move. Practitioners of Aikido, of standing meditation of Zen, or of Vipassana meditation, are surely familiar with this (and Paxton has learned them all), along with traditional martial arts and breathing exercises. According to a Japanese master, “Standing, that’s it. Standing still and looking inside the body. As you are standing still, numerous parts of the body begin moving autonomously. Observe, and be aware of them,” – and that is the best exercise to keep the body receptive.²¹

And further, one might be reminded of the body of a Noh actor, most of the time standing or sitting still and performing only minimal gestures when “dancing,” with its intensity coming solely from his concentration on somatic sensations. As Nishihara Tadashi points out:

A Noh actor does not “look” at himself as a visual object. Wearing a Noh mask, he can barely see his own image with his eyes. Nevertheless (or, because of that), the performer is allowed to

¹⁹ Steve Paxton, “Fall after Newton Transcript,” first published in *Contact Quarterly* (Fall 88), and included in a booklet for Contact Improvisation Archive: DVD#2 Magnesium/Peripheral Vision/Soft Pallet (VIDEOA/Contact Collaborations, Inc., 2006).

²⁰ Steve Paxton, “Improvisation is ...,” *Contact Quarterly* (Spring/Summer 87), p.16, and “Drafting Interior Techniques,” *Contact Quarterly* (Winter/Spring 93), 62-63.

²¹ Tatsuru Uchida, *Watashi no karada wa atama ga ii [My body is clever]* (Tokyo: Bungei-shunju-sha), 52-53 [TM]. Also, for a “feel & connect” method introduced to William Forsyth by a Japanese martial art master Akira Hino, see *William Forsyth, budo-ka, Hino Akira ni deau [William Forsyth meets a martial art master Akira Hino]* (Tokyo: Hakusui-sya, 2005).

concentrate on his internal somatic sensation.²²

During this process, the performer guided into a state of “no-mind,” “his body reaches the stage in which things to do will come by somewhere from there and simply be accepted as they are.”²³

We could find here a curious turn from vision to somaesthesia, which was already quite obvious in Paxton’s description of the sense of being, or in Forti’s “dance state.” It is funny and yet revealing that Forti mentioned Carlos Castaneda, widely known to followers of the new age movement as an anthropologist who introduced them to the teachings of Yaqui Indian shaman don Juan Matus in Mexico.²⁴ As Yusuke Maki points out, one of his strange but consistent lessons given to Castaneda is about how you use the eyes so as to overcome a trap of “clarity.”²⁵ Asked how he could cut off his internal talk, which was a hindrance to “live like a warrior,” the old man answered:

First of all you must use your ears to take some of the burden from your eyes. We have been using our eyes to judge the world since the time we were born. We talk to others and to ourselves mainly about what we see. A warrior is aware of that and listens to the world; he listens to the sounds of the world.²⁶

The point of this lesson (seeing without focusing/fixing one’s gaze on anything) is, explains Maki, “not not to see, not to use the eyes, but not to be alienated by the eyes.”²⁷ Our normal “focused seeing” presupposes a differentiation between ‘figure’ and ‘ground’, abstracting a certain set of clearly and yet arbitrary contoured objects and ignoring the rest of the world as if they didn’t exist. The reality then is always beyond our reach, since it becomes distanced from us by our own interest/desire/excess, its representations always already distorted and never transparent as signs. To get rid of our habitual reliance on vision and visibility in judging (and thus limiting) whatever we encounter in the world, a warrior, or a man of knowledge, “listens to the world,” that is, not only listens, but smells, tastes, and touches as well, feels the world in a more immediate and non hierarchical way, with all senses freed from “the dictatorial vision,” so that, as his internal dialogue stops, the world stops being imprisoned within the existing framework he has lived by so far.²⁸ “Unfocused seeing,” therefore, is “*an unrestricted readiness for things unexpected/unpredictable*. It is about paying attention to the ‘ground’ of the world and enriching the world.”²⁹ Not being captivated by objects of interest, keeping ‘figure’ and ‘ground’ not yet (or no longer) differentiated, you receive and taste the

²² Tadashi Nishihara, *Zeami no Keiko Tetsugaku [Zeami’s philosophy of practice]* (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 2009), 182 [TM].

²³ *Ibid.*, 228-229, 112 [TM].

²⁴ Since publishing *The Teachings of Don Juan* in 1968, Carlos Castaneda has become the bestselling author of numerous books, including *A Separate Reality* (1971), *Journey to Ixtlan* (1972), and *Tales of Power* (1974).

²⁵ Yusuke Mahi, *Kiryu no naru oto: koukyo suru komyun [Sound of an air current: a symphonic commune]* (Tokyo: Chikuma-shobou, 2003), 105.

²⁶ Castaneda, *A Separate Reality: Further Conversation with Don Juan* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1971), 219.

²⁷ Maki, *Kiryu no naru oto*, 105.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 100-102.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 107 [TM].

whole world as it is, so the world remains as it should be – “incomprehensible,” “a sheer mystery”.³⁰ Guided to another level of clarity then, one becomes aware of the limits of clarity.

And it is noteworthy that this teaching of how to use the eyes to restore the world seems a prerequisite for, or closely related to “the technique of *not-doing*,” namely, leaving what one always does, or, what one knows how to do, so that one would not only enrich the world but also get to “the secret of a strong body.” In the case of looking at a tree, instead of focusing immediately on the foliage, Castaneda was told “to start focusing on the shadows of the leaves on one single branch and then eventually work my way to the whole tree, and not to let my eyes go back to the leaves, because the first deliberate step to storing personal power was to allow the body to ‘not-do’”.³¹ Restoring the world and restoring the body, therefore, should coincide. “So let’s say then that your body returns to me because I am its friends,” says don Duan. It is, I feel tempted to add, ultimately a teaching of somatics, as he insists, “the only thing that is real is the being in you that is going to die. To arrive at that being is the *not-doing* of the self.”³²

The theme of this “unfocused seeing,” not surprisingly, seems closely connected to the disintegration of the self as a conscious controlling subject; a prerequisite condition for possession and shamanism thus resurfaces. In his studies of blind *biwa* players, Hiromi Hyodo writes:

... with the eyes unfocused and vacant, or with the eyes closed in such a state, we begin to hear what we don’t notice with the eyes wide open. Once our eyes stop selecting, we begin to feel the world around us full of noises and buzzing of those invisible.... The noises invade directly our internal organs and so, without control of our vision, they may even go far enough to blur the outline of ‘me’ as a conscious subject. Opening up yourself in the middle of these unseen noises and synchronizing with them – that was a method as well in the pre-modern society to contact with the “other world.”³³

According to Hyodo, the way blind people experience the world primarily through hearing and skin sensation, with no coherent self image seen in the mirror, results in their lack of normal formation of self-identity, which in turn would contribute to their potentials as shamans connecting with different personas and thus being transformed into them, that is, “possessed” by them.

Telling a story of the spirits is giving voices to the bustling invisible spirits, and it is an act akin to a shamanistic ability of the blind men. And if a reciter acquires different personae (whether

³⁰ Castaneda, *Separate Reality*, 220. Maki, *Kiryu no naru oto*, 106. The trap of clarity or “focused seeing” in a way could be comparable to that of stylized and prefixed dancing. When Halprin left the stylization of movement and went for improvisation, she found in it possibilities not as a tool for “self-expression” but for a “fine art of letting go control,” as Jamie McHue, a somatic theorist and practitioner, puts it. Or in Halprin’s own words, “Improvisation was used to release things that were blocked off because we were traditional modern dancers.” See Anna Halprin, *Moving Toward Life: Five Decades of Transformational Dance*, ed. Rachel Kaplan (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press/University Press of New England, 1995), 77.

³¹ Castaneda, *Journey to Ixtlan: The Lessons of Don Juan* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1972), 180-181.

³² *Ibid.*, 200.

³³ Hiromi Hyodo, *Biwa-hoshi: ikai wo kataru hitobito [Biwa Players: the people conveying stories of the spirit world]* (Tokyo: Iwanami-shinsho, 2009), 8-9 [TM].

human or spiritual) in the world made present through his voice, an act of storytelling cannot be what is called “expression” in the modern terminology. Rather, while the ‘expression’ presupposes the “self,” the act of storytelling should lie in the process through which the “self” diffuses and spreads to different personae.³⁴

True, not every point of his Lacanian interpretation on the blind biwa musician could be applicable to the case of dancers and the “dance state,” and neither could Castaneda’s learning to return to the unarticulated oneness with the world. Nonetheless, there seems to be commonality, since they both suggest that no stable self identity can be or should be assumed; any story, any representation, united by a single point of view, should be taken as a fictitious, “unreal” constitution, a necessarily arbitral articulation of the unarticulated. And dancers, as long as their deep contact with their own bodies is not lost, should be the ones who stay beyond the “unreal.”

3) Learning from the bodies of old age

I made a long detour before I haven’t even started talking about aging bodies in dance! Well, I did, in the hope that by now it seems a little more probable that dance arrives only when one leaves a fictitious unity of “I” – fictitious but necessary to live as a member of any human society – and that, by exploring the “awareness of the present physical reality,” one could open up for some other alternative modes of being in the world, not solely dependent on the eyes but trusting more fully one’s somatic sensation. Dance then would prove itself to be an art of touching and reclaiming our nature, a soft, wild animal, so to say, dormant and yet still surviving in our all domesticated, colonized bodies. Understood this way, here opens a room, finally, to see an affinity that dance may have for old bodies. Or, even more radically, I wish to take a chance to argue that dancers could – should – learn from those old, deteriorated, and largely handicapped bodies forced to move out of the center and endure in the margins of our society.

As mentioned before briefly, in the Noh theater the performer often moves very little and slowly, standing or sitting still onstage for an extended amount of time. However, as Noh master Hisao Kanze points out, he is expected to show an extraordinarily intense physical presence so that the entire stage, a space around him, changes before the eyes of the audience.³⁵ According to Shimpei Matsuoka, the notion of the intensity of this “body not moving / staying still,” which we consider today as the most characteristic to Noh playing, was developed centuries ago, when Zeami (1363-1443), during the later part of his life, found it the ultimate principle to maintain a full concentration addressed inwards along with a quiet restraint in energies of the body movement going outwards. A minimalism in the form of bodily action, or inaction, does have an utmost positive intension. “There is all the difference in the world between a mere ‘not doing’ and a positive ‘not doing’, although both of them could be regarded as a method for aging performers.”³⁶

³⁴ Ibid., 11-12 [TM].

³⁵ Hisaoo Kanze, *Kokoro yori kokoro ni tsutauru hana [Flower carried from heart to heart]* (Tokyo: Kadokawa-gakugei-syuppan, 2008, 67-68.

³⁶ Shimpei Matsuoka, *Utage no Shintai: Basara kara Zeami e [Bodies of festivity: from Basara to Zeami]* (Tokyo: Iwanami-shoten, 2004), 203-204 [TM].

In addition, Matsuoka also explains that refinement of Noh masks, especially masks of woman, which have only tiny holes for a performer to see through, must have had affected Zeami's shift of emphasis from mimicry to posture, from representation of the character to presentation of the performer's body".³⁷

As the biwa players use their blindness as a springboard to recite the world of emotion so powerfully, the medieval Noh actors, who with their masks had to live half in darkness onstage, came to reach their overwhelmingly strong physicality from this rather similar situation.³⁸

Moreover, in the later Zeami's training methodology, it is the lessons of an aged body that comes first, followed by those of a woman's body and of a warrior's body. "Keep your mind serene and your eyes far distant," he wrote. A simple, yet apt instruction, explained a bit more in the passage saying, "as the eyes get dim with age."³⁹ Here again, therefore, an unfocused, blurred vision and a calm, empty, untroubled mind are recommended, a pair perhaps not unrelated to the one introduced in don Juan's teaching of "not-doing." As Tadashi Nishihira argues, this is not a naturalistic imitation of the outlook of the aged man, such as bending down and stumbling, but an instruction for the performer to concentrate on a certain type of somatic sensation within his own body, which leads him to get to the point internally without having to look at himself on the mirror.⁴⁰ The aged man in this case is primarily a disguised god, who appears on stage to give his blessing in a stylized fashion; since none of all too human emotional complications or individual characters interfere, it is a learning of how to comprehend the basics, namely, a posture in inaction; "a simple standing, through which you come to realize how to situate yourself inside your body. That should be done first, and then, you start from there to learn various characters in details as its applied cases," says Kanze.⁴¹ In this way, the aged body is placed as a model, a reference point for beginners, whose bodies eventually need to be transformed into the loci where "something arrives," something other than themselves – or in Matsuoka's words, transformed into "bodies of depth, of pathos, capable of carrying the repose of the deceased."⁴²

At this point, however, one should ask how and to what degree such a lesson of the aged body could be seen grounded in the reality of aging bodies. In other words, we should now turn from the ideal, or exceptional case to the case of ordinary, untrained people of old age so as to see if my wildly stretched interpretation of that instruction for "serene mind and dim vision" or "a positive not-doing" could be of any use in the broader context of postmodern dance.

One thing that struck me after the catastrophe of the earthquake and tsunami on March 11 of 2011 is the utmost immobility of the elderly people. Not only could they not run away fast enough

³⁷ Ibid., 208, 212-214 [TM].

³⁸ Ibid., 216-217 [TM].

³⁹ See Nishihira, *Zeami no Keiko Tetsugaku*, 275 [TM], for his commentary on Zeami's texts, especially on *Syugyoku Tokka*. Also see Hisao Kanze, *Kanze Hisao Zeami wo yomu [Kanze Hisao reads Zeami]* (Heibon-sya, 2001), 200.

⁴⁰ Nishihira, *ibid.*, 180-183, 275.

⁴¹ Kanze, *Kanze Hisao Zeami wo yomu*, 202, 200 [TM].

⁴² Matsuoka, *Utage no Shintai*, 216-217 [TM].

from the tsunami, but also quite a few of them couldn't be relocated from the radioactively contaminated areas, because they were too ill, too weak, and needed substantial medical care daily. And some of other old people who have survived (not necessarily too weak to move out) resist leaving their hometown, even though they are informed of the possible consequential risks and troubles.

Of course, on the one hand, we know there is nothing new about it; the longer you live, the more you become part of where you have been, so it becomes more difficult to change your habitation. On the other hand, living in the age of voracious globalization and of ever accelerating information technology, we may accept – or even prefer – a nomadic life style of hybrid diasporas and keep moving rapidly from one place to another, in a fashion comparable to a commodity status of a work of art in modern society – siteless, homeless, assessed and circulated universally in a free market as well as in the discourses of the art world. Yet, against this social climate that allows no attachment to any particular place geographically and culturally, seniors do look truly rooted in (or even captivated by) the *genius loci* – with their body movements limited, frozen, and out of control, becoming tightly united with Nature, Mother Earth, as if anticipating the time to come;⁴³ and, at the same time, as if giving us a lesson on how much we as bodily subjects still depend on the space of our daily life, the surrounding environment, a natural, cultural, and social one, like a baby truly dependent on mother's body, while we as half cyborgs share a common fantasy, more or less, that such an old umbilical cord to one's hometown should not count.

Due to the lack of mobility and inseparability from where they have been, old people (with a few exceptions) no longer live in a time frame set for functionality and efficiency. They cannot and/or they don't have to go fast, to catch up with the speed in the same way as people of the younger generation who are actively working. In this sense as well they have fallen off from the standard for modern subjects, marginalized and excluded from the mainstream social activities of this world, regarded already half on the way out to the other world.

This may sound depressing, and yet, if we look at the other side of living in the margin, it might turn out to be a blessing. Exploring a certain similarity between seniors and infants, a scholar of Japanese religious studies Toji Kamata points out, "... old people and children, they have no conception of time as evenly regulated by a clock. If the mode of linear thinking on the present days is closely connected with this clock time, one can suppose that old people and children who stay out of it are the antiquity in the modern times. In addition, senescence and childhood are the antiquity of one's life. Within the bodies of old age and of infancy, can't we see dwell on a mythological time, or a circulatory timeless time, uncontaminated by notions of usefulness, use values, and efficiency?"⁴⁴ *Because they are situated not in the center but in the margins, that is, expected to be neither productive*

⁴³ Some of you may well recall Halprin's muddy, almost buried body in *Returning Home: Moving with the Earth Body*, 2003, or Tatsumi Hijikata's degenerated body, broken and penetrated by the beings other than himself (so he believed), lying down and crawling on the floor. He would not take it for granted that one stands effortlessly, mindlessly, while knowing that dance all over the world begins with standing. See Kazuko Kuniyoshi, "Hijikata Tatsumi to Ankoku Butoh: miidasareta nikutai [Tatsumi Hijikata and his Ankoku Butoh (Dance of Darkness): The Retrieved Bodies]," in *Tatsumi Hijikata's Butoh: Surrealism of the Flesh / Ontology of the "Body"* (Tokyo: Keio University Press, 2004), 11, 64.

⁴⁴ Toji Kamata, *Ou-dou-ron: kodomo to roujin no seishin-shi [Writing on old men and little ones: a spiritual ethnography]* (Tokyo: Shinyou-sya, 1988), 71 [TM].

nor reproductive, they live day by day, moment by moment, projecting no goal, no perspective for the future but sealed within the present. Which is, in a way, a true luxury one could find only in such special retreat settings as a meditation center, a monastery, a temple, or (even) a hospice if properly operated. Spending some time in those places we become “decolonized,” even if temporarily, and begin to question the logic of technology and progression that our compulsively goal-oriented culture imposes on us, as we learn how to pause, slow down, and experience the present in its pure state, not much “doing” something but simply savoring “the sense of ‘being’”(Paxton), or doing “not-doing”(Castaneda).

In a booklet PRACTICAL VIPASSANA MEDITATIONAL EXERCISES, Mahashi Sayadaw in Yangon says:

The yogi should behave as if he were a weak invalid. People in normal health rise easily and quickly or abruptly. Not so with feeble invalids, who do so slowly and gently. The same is the case with people suffering from ‘back-ache’ who rise gently lest the back hurt and cause pain. / So also with meditating yogis. They have to make their changes of posture gradually and gently; only then will mindfulness, concentration and insight be good....

If the weak and suffering bodies have the resources like this, the aged bodies, too, should be equally capable of showing them. They do require a most delicate care and gentle handling, in the ideal situation at least, and have to take enough time to do whatever, so that, with their slow, gradual, and gentle movement, the state of their mind – could we expect – kept serene and quiet.

According to Kamata, another condition that infants and seniors share in common is a certain liminality, or ambiguity, since both stand between life and death, between this world and the other one, although they are heading in opposite directions. “In myths, old folklores, and traditional rituals,” he writes, “gods and spiritual beings appear embodied in the forms of old men and children, or they do so using old men and children as their ‘channels = mediums.’”⁴⁵ As they belong to this ambiguous field where life and death are mingled inseparably, they often enter into the altered state of consciousness – half dreaming and half awoken, possessed and spirited away by supernatural beings.⁴⁶ In Japan there are proverbs saying, “you belong to gods until you become seven,” and “at the age of sixty you return to your ancestors.” Old people and little ones, the beings in the margins, are an anomaly, uncanny and sacred at once, while other people living in the center have to drop everything for a certain amount of time and go through a special process such as fasting, retreat, and other regimens, every time they wish to approach the spiritual dimension.⁴⁷

And again, dancers, too, belong to this stage of antiquity, as so proclaimed Akaji Maro:

Dancers are connected to the world directly through the skin sensation. We are allowed to be babies until we die; that’s our privilege. In exchange for that, we serve as sacrifices, offering our dance to invisible beings. I may be sounding bombastic but it is, I believe, part of the planetary

⁴⁵ Ibid., 23 [TM].

⁴⁶ Ibid., 28, 30.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 553.

system.⁴⁸

Dancers, as if just having come out to the world, with all the senses fresh and fully open, trust and savor the sense of oneness with the world. Even though we might have outgrown such a jubilant stage of infancy, it will come back again, as we get old. If so, everyone has a chance, “everyone is a dancer”!

All this may sound too hopeful, too good to be true. The bliss of childhood gets lost much too soon, and more so these days, since infants become tamed and “socialized” prematurely by poor public education systems and other pressures from adults. When my daughter was very little, someone told me that there were three sentences parents should not use, namely, “don’t do that!” “keep it up!” and “hurry!” And of course they are the lines you say every day and every minute, for otherwise you can’t function well enough as a responsible member of human society. We don’t tolerate any better senior members, or perhaps even worse, each time they fail, can’t keep up, and can’t hurry up – but (we should remember) they have no other choice, do they? (And dancing is somehow about taking time, isn’t it?) Kamata is also aware of this maddening tendency; thanks to those social control systems for old people and children to be sent to (school, hospital, institutions for the aged, and etc.), with the clock time and its efficiency logic imposed upon them, their mythical powers have been largely suppressed in modern times.⁴⁹ In spite of that, or rather, *because of* that, the antiquity of one’s life quietly kept in the pre-modern, anti-modern aspect of the marginal and liminal beings, should never, ever, die out. Those beings who stride over the boundaries of the self / the other, inside / outside, and life / death, in a way similar to sacrifices in ancient times, just by being there as they are, protect all mortals from a biting wind blowing from the other world.

I finish this sluggish paper with a quote from Kazuo Ohno, who, as we all know, was a supreme case of the “dancer=medium=old man”, utterly immersed with the phase where “death and life become one.”

As I always say, I see flowers; how beautiful! Then I go down the stairs, walking into the world of the dead. The world of the flowers is the world of death. As I see them, my soul sympathizes, and my body becomes one with them, and I forget I am still alive. I find myself dancing in the middle of the death itself. The world of the dead, the world of the living, they alternate, without my noticing it. Death, life, death, life.⁵⁰

Or, a poem dedicated to him, would that be more appropriate?

ECCE HOMO --- For Mr. Kazuo Ohno
Born to dance
With no sign of diminution

⁴⁸ An interview with Akaji Maro, *Asahi Shinbun* [Asahi Newspaper], April 23, 2011 [TM].

⁴⁹ Kamata, *Ou-dou-ron*, 71, 55-56.

⁵⁰ Ohno, *Keiko no Kotoba*, 168 [TM].

Sadness of flowers in the field
and birds in the sky all coming in
Dancing so tender
Behold the man

Dancing and dancing unnoticed
Going up the stairs quietly
Up to the top then he
Will be walking in lightly
Over the auspicious clouds
In the bosom of the Great Being⁵¹

⁵¹ Sumiko Yagawa, “ECCE HOMO: Ohno Kazuo shi ni [for Mr. Kazuo Ohno],” in *Ohno Kazuo: Hyakunenn no butoh [Butoh of one hundred years]*, ed. Kazuo Ohno Research Institute of Butoh (Tokyo: Film-art-sya, 2007), 34-35 [TM].

* This article is a revised version of a report presented at a symposium of *Aging Body in Dance: Seeking Aesthetics and Politics of the Body through the Comparison of Euro-American and Japanese Cultures* organized by Prof. Gabriele Brandstetter (Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin) and Nanako Nakajima (research fellow, Japan Society for Promotion of Science, Saitama University at that time) and held at Uferstuio Berlin, June 28th to 30th 2012. It will be anthologized in a book based on the symposium. I would like to thank Prof. Brandstetter and Dr. Nakajima for their hospitality and permission to print this article in *JTLA (Journal of the Faculty of Letters, The University of Tokyo, Aesthetics)*, Vol.39 (2014).