EVENT SUMMARY:

From Postwar Butoh to a Contemporary ‘Rebellion of the Body’

Book Launch by Dominique Savitri Bonarjee

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Introduction

Good evening, everyone. Thank you so much for coming to this event. I also want to thank the Daiwa Foundation for inviting me and hosting all of us. We are here tonight for a presentation about my book, *‘Butoh as Heard by a Dancer’.* Although we are calling this a launch, the book was actually published just over a year ago. So, in a way, we are celebrating its first birthday, which feels even more significant.

I want to thank the people who allowed this book to come to life, specifically the artists I interviewed. The book is built on ten conversations with dancers, artists, and one philosopher who are all part of the legacy of Butoh. Without their kindness, generosity, and time, this book would not exist; these conversations form the backbone of the work.

I would like to extend a special thank you to Yoshito Ohno, the son of co-founder Kazuo Ohno. For those of you who are completely new to Butoh, I will speak with a "beginner’s mind," as the Buddhists say. Kazuo Ohno was the co-founder of Butoh, and Yoshito Ohno is his son, with whom I had the joy of studying for three years. The Ohno family was incredibly generous and helped me secure a visa to stay in Japan, which is what enabled me to do the research and write this book.

The title, ‘Butoh as Heard by a Dancer’, contains a key clue: this is not an academic theory of Butoh. I am a practitioner. I did not set out to write a book; I simply set out to go, learn, listen, and imbibe. I was very fortunate to stay in Japan for three years on a Lisa Ullmann scholarship, which is another fund for dancers I must deeply thank. I went there to learn directly from these artists, and the book is fundamentally about what we call direct transmission. It documents the intimate conversations I had with them. Because I am a practitioner, I also wanted to share how this knowledge translated into my own practice. Many passages in the book are written in a style I call "embodied writing," which aims to propagate the direct transmission I received. "Hearing," in this context, refers to a form of embodied listening, being porous, highly attentive, and attuned to these encounters.

This form of direct transmission is a pedagogical model originating in India known as guru-shishya parampara. Parampara translates to "lineage". It is a teaching model based on physical proximity and an intimate, spiritual relationship grounded in commitment, trust, and obedience. While this was the model I pursued, the concept of lineage in Butoh is highly complex because Butoh consists of many co-existing lineages.

Buddhist sutras famously begin with the phrase, "Thus have I heard". This signals that the goal is not to create entirely new knowledge, but to pass existing, subtle, and embodied knowledge from body to body through physical proximity. This is not something you can learn on YouTube; it must be deeply imbibed. The parampara model is uniquely suited for transmitting this subtle and embodied depth.

The Asbestos Kan

This is a wonderful archival photo. When I put this image into an AI-powered PowerPoint generator, the AI humorously suggested it was "a group of people playing the guitar"! In reality, as you can see, there is someone with something wrapped around his head. For those new to the form, the founder of Butoh is Tatsumi Hijikata, shown here in rehearsal. I want to express my gratitude to the Tatsumi Hijikata Archive at Keio University for granting me access to these archival photo.

During its formative years in the 1960s and 70s, Butoh's development relied entirely on physical proximity to the teachers. This rehearsal took place at the Asbestos Kan. You might wonder about the name; the studio belonged to Hijikata's father-in-law, who was in the asbestos trade, and they named the studio to honor him. It is actually quite fitting for Butoh, which deals extensively with themes of death, decay, and darkness. The Asbestos Kan was a vibrant gathering place where people lived in close proximity to Hijikata, and where co-founder Kazuo Ohno also came to teach. I write about this in the book, particularly in my conversation with Natsu Nakajima, one of the first women to dance Butoh. She recounted how she literally had to bang on the doors of the Asbestos Kan to be let in because they did not want to admit women at the time.

As a practitioner, my book is written to encourage practice. Before I read a short passage, I want to leave you with a question to hold in your mind throughout the rest of this talk, a question that has no simple answer: "How do you live existence through and with this body that you inhabit?"

In relation to this question, I want to read the opening lines of Hinagata, a text by one of my teachers, Ko Murobushi. I helped translate his texts, attempting to capture their deep poetry. Ko's manager translated the title Hinagata as "The Shape of Everlasting Darkness".

Here are the opening lines from Ko:
"It is a question which violently cuts off the continuation of my thought. How and from where can the total fulfillment of this existence be fathomed within this alien form which is the fate created by nature."
The "alien form," of course, is our own body.

Now, I will read a short passage from my book describing my first visit to the Ohno Studio:
"When we entered the studio, warm, dry air was already blowing hard from a yellowed aircon unit hanging from the central beam of the white space. The space was enveloped in white light, surrounded by white walls and held by a dark polished wooden floor. The change in temperature and light made my skin react, shrinking back and tightening. I would learn about it later in Yoshito's lesson: the ritual of arrival that he called 'meeting the space' when all your senses tune towards the angles, the shadows, the sounds and the ancestral presences. Because I would learn from him that the difference between any other dance and Butoh is that dance is change in space and Butoh is transformation of space.
I followed Yoshito at a distance, each foot dangling with a weight that made my presence feel too glaring for this environment. I realised that I could quickly learn Yoshito's method of swirling along open curves, and this tactic would dampen the shuddering of my body and of my anxious thoughts. Mutely we both tracked the emptiness and the fine dust that our movement unsettled. Our furtive, respectful eye contact would sometimes pierce through our circling, returning us to the dimension of harder things where we couldn't evade the cold floor sucking at our feet. The damp darkness whose muddy fingers were reaching for contact with the soul. Past dancers were leaching through the carpentry."

This passage describes meeting Yoshito Ohno for the first time. It was highly unnerving, especially given his fame. He was incredibly kind, however, and let me film class one day.

Here we are in the Kazuo Ohno Studio. The bamboo poles you see are not props; they are our teachers. Because bamboo is hollow, we use it to connect with and feel the emptiness inside our own bodies, while simultaneously finding the strength that arises from that emptiness.

What is Butoh?
So, what is Butoh exactly? I don't think my book provides a single answer, because Butoh is a multi-headed beast.

This photo captures what is considered the first official performance of Butoh, titled Kinjiki (Forbidden Colors) in 1959. Based on a book by Yukio Mishima exploring the taboos of homosexuality, the performance took place in near-complete darkness and shocked audiences. It was presented at a dance festival in Tokyo, featuring Tatsumi Hijikata (left) and Yoshito Ohno (right). Following this performance, Hijikata was banned from the mainstream dance world.

Rather than a linear legacy, Butoh is rhizomatic, like Japanese knotweed, it keeps growing in wild, uncontrollable directions. To map this development, I structured my book using the framework of dynamic systems theory:

1. Emergence (1959–1960s): Following his banishment, Hijikata co-founded what became known as Ankoku Butoh: the "dance of utter darkness". This wild, anarchic period at the Asbestos Kan was an

interdisciplinary nexus. It attracted dancers alongside prominent literary and artistic figures, including Yukio Mishima and radical translator Tatsuhiko Shibusawa, all seeking to use the body to respond to their historical moment.

Note on the Postwar Context: While people frequently link Butoh to the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the movement emerged fourteen years later. It was shaped by a long postwar aftermath, where rapid Westernisation and the dissolution of traditional beliefs (such as the Emperor's renunciation of divinity) created a profound crisis of culture and identity. Butoh arose as a radical physical vocabulary to process this transformation and mutation.

2. Structure (1970s): In the 1970s, Hijikata began working heavily with choreography, structure, and a more formalised master-student lineage. This choreographic phase, heavily based on Butoh-fu (poetic notations), is discussed in the book through conversations with his direct students.
3. Dispersion: Even in the 1960s and 70s, Butoh dispersed globally. Younger contemporaries like Akira Kasai, Ko Murobushi, and Masaki Iwana took the core ideas of Butoh but went their own way, sometimes explicitly rejecting Hijikata while keeping the name. Today, while Butoh remains underground and niche in Japan, it is highly recognised internationally in cities like Berlin and South America. It behaves not like a uniform plantation, but like a field of wild flowers. While Hijikata never left Japan, his students acted as "carrier pigeons," spreading the form globally.
4. Complexity: The contemporary generation integrates Butoh into performance art and contemporary dance without necessarily using the "Butoh dancer" label. Artists like Yuko Kaseki (Berlin), Takao Kawaguchi, and Yukio Suzuki represent this phase. Kawaguchi uses the form in performance art to replicate historical Butoh bodies, while Suzuki utilises a strong Butoh foundation to create contemporary dance.
5. Exhaustion: The book closes with a conversation with Kuniichi Uno, known as the philosopher of the body. He became close to Hijikata in the late 70s and 80s. Uno was the only Japanese doctoral student of French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, and he brings a profound philosophical perspective to the work.

These drawings are scores I produced during my PhD research, where I explored how to transmit and transduce knowledge (transduce meaning the transformation of energy). I use these visual scores in the book to evoke the energy and movement of the five phases: Emergence, Structure, Dispersion, Complexity, and Exhaustion. Images are incredibly important for capturing the spirit of the founders. Kazuo Ohno and Tatsumi Hijikata were a full generation apart. Kazuo Ohno was drafted into the war and spent seven years in a prisoner of war camp. He danced to process this immense trauma. When he returned as the sole survivor of his camp, he made the radical choice to dance as a woman, embodying a "mother energy". This was not drag; it was a deliberate search for an energy that could resist the masculine aggression that had caused the war.

Hijikata, who was a child during the war, found his primary inspiration in Ohno’s body. You can think of Kazuo Ohno as the mother and Tatsumi Hijikata as the father of Butoh. Together, they dismantled social binaries of gender, nationality, and hierarchy. Yoshito Ohno shared that Hijikata would sometimes wear women's underwear just to physically experience how heavily binaries are embedded in our garments and our movements.

My teacher Natsu Nakajima, who sadly passed away quite suddenly the year before last, taught me for three years. She beautifully captured the core challenge of the form:
"The most difficult thing to teach about is how to be, how to vanish humanity—social humanity. It is important to be unconsciousness or the material body, the neutral body. We need this. This is the most difficult part to teach: how to vanish humanity."

Vanishing "social humanity" means stripping away the rigid labels, names, and hierarchies given to us by a highly codified society. This physical emptying is about cultivating availability.

Another student of Hijikata, Yukio Waguri, who worked closely with him during the highly structured theatrical phase of the 70s, explained it this way:
"Hijikata wrote that when we empty our body, something comes inside our body, and our body will be filled by something and explodes in small explosions. The nikutai (flesh body) runs away. But after the body has run away, the body is now empty and will again be filled. This is the process or rhythm of Butoh."

Availability means being completely open to what we do not know. Hijikata famously advised that creators should "drop a ladder inside themselves and eat from their darkness", to feed on the unknown rather than their defined social roles.

Ko Murobushi expressed a similar sentiment regarding this emptying:
"I always think: what is my name? My parents named me, but it's not me. It's just one role, and I don't think it's correct. I felt this is not what I am. I have the same feeling with my sexuality. I'm a boy, but I also felt something different."

Masaki Iwana, another independent voice who lived on a rustic, broken-down farm in Normandy, formulated three essential aspects of Butoh

1. Dancing your interior, unknown landscape and dancing "dark intentions".
2. Going against conventional aesthetic beauty to explore physical taboos, such as disability, handicap, and illness.
3. Developing a highly personal, individual method rather than conforming to the standardised forms and benchmarks of contemporary dance.

A Contemporary Rebellion of the Body

This brings us to a contemporary "rebellion of the body". Here is a photo of Tatsumi Hijikata acting as a provocateur, holding a watermelon as he walks past riot police in Shinjuku during a 1968 protest. Hijikata wrote: "To a production-oriented society, the aimless use of the body, which I call dance, is a deadly enemy which must be taboo." He also stated: "I am a body shop. My profession is the work of human rehabilitation which goes today by the name of dancer."

This is incredibly relevant today. We see people globally putting their bodies on the line in protests in the US, Iran, London, and elsewhere, using their physical presence to live their politics.

A major inspiration for me is Kubi Kukuri Takuzo, who daily performed the extreme act of hanging himself from a tree in his garden to experience life at its absolute boundary and define what was meaningful to him. Witnessing his performance action was deeply moving; it felt like witnessing a raw state of existence. It inspired me to think about how I could take Butoh into my own practice to make it resonate with the crises of our times. While I did not experience the postwar era in Japan, our bodies remain the core site through which we must navigate a deeply troubled world.

Butoh Mutations

My ongoing project is called 'Butoh Mutations'. It serves as a framework for my pedagogy, activism, and community gatherings. "Mutations" refers to the core Butoh themes of metamorphosis, transformation, and finding the in-between zone, what is called ma in Japanese.

This concept is inspired by Swiss philosopher Jean Gebser, who defined mutations as non-linear, non-progressive shifts in consciousness triggered by crisis. These shifts shatter our assumptions and force us to view our existence in entirely new ways. Gebser posited that our current global crisis is fundamentally a transformation of time; time is becoming highly compressed and intense. Butoh is a remarkable physical practice for directly experiencing this intensity of time.

Just over ten years ago, on my last day of research in Japan, I performed a public action in Shimbashi, the financial district of Tokyo. Dressed in the standard "salaryman" uniform (a black suit), I spent forty minutes performing a slow, gravity-bound collapse on the pavement while crowds of busy commuters rushed past. Almost no one looked; they walked past like movie extras. You can watch the film on my website.

This individual collapse has since evolved into collaborative group actions, a less extreme but equally potent way to disrupt the "next thing, next thing" speed of modern life and take stock of our reality.

- The Brexit Collapse: On the day Brexit was scheduled to occur, I invited a group to collapse together at King's Cross station near the Eurostar terminal, creating a physical ritual to experience the intensity of that historical moment.
- The City of London Collapse: Thirty-five of us collapsed for a full hour in a privately owned public space during gale-force winds. The security guards couldn't remove us because they had no idea what we were doing, and once they were told we were meditating, they left us in peace.
- Avignon Collapse: I am currently planning a collaborative collapse in Avignon this year, and I invite anyone interested in experiencing this direct transmission to join me.

Mutating Butoh today also means examining how modern computational technologies condition our physical bodies. Look around, everyone's head is constantly bent over a smartphone. My teacher Natsu Nakajima once told me: "Art has to be physical now".

This directly inspired my concept of the somatic revolt. After experiencing severe physical pain from endless computer work, I realised my body was staging its own rebellion, refusing to be forced into artificial standards of productivity.

For my PhD, I developed alternative, handcrafted computational technologies. This aligns with what Hijikata called Butoh-tai (Butoh body) or Butoh sentiment, allowing Butoh to guide our relationship with physical materials and making.

This is a brief clip of a wearable computer instrument I hand-crocheted. It generates live musical compositions by measuring the wearer's physical movements and picking up ambient electrical signals from the environment. You can see more on my website.

Scores for Unknowing

My current project is called ‘Scores for Unknowing’, created with electronic artist Mika Satomi. Mika hand-builds computers using traditional crafting techniques like weaving, embroidery, knitting, and sewing, producing fully functional machines that look nothing like laptops or smartphones.

We are currently working with three interacting AI voice models. This concept is inspired by the choreographic phase of the 1970s and Butoh-fu (words of Butoh), where Hijikata used poetic utterance rather than visual demonstrations to guide his students, focusing on the direct bodily effect of the sound. We use AI voice models to explore how bodies react to immediate vocalisations. Crucially, we ask: how can we use AI to help us enter states of not knowing? This is not about using AI to retrieve answers, but rather utilising the latency and unpredictability of these models to open up a space of the unknown.

I will close with a quote by philosopher Byung-Chul Han: "A society obsessed with production does not have any access to strong play to death as an intensity of life."

In Scores for Unknowing, we are striving to cultivate "strong play", a space of profound play where there is something real at stake. Thank you very much.