Lingering Heat and Local Global J Stuff

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1. The members of KATHY grab spectators, who dutifully remain still in tableau, holding up their books as long as possible. Art Center Gallery, Tokyo, 2005. (Photo by Maeda Keizo; courtesy of Carol Martin)
The loss of a universe is not worth taking seriously.


Until relatively recently, the political and aesthetic focus of postwar Japanese performance was fixed on ideas about premodern Japanese aesthetics, modernization, and Westernization. After World War II, the subject of modernization got entangled, sometimes in reactionary ways, with how to restore “Japaneseness” to Japanese aesthetics. This project was undertaken against the background of Japan having been both an extreme aggressor and a victim in the war: the “rape of Nanjing” and “comfort women” stood in contrast to the fire bombings of Tokyo and the mushroom clouds rising over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Reconstructing the sensibility of premodern Japan that was so much a part of Hijikata Tatsuji’s butoh and even Suzuki Tadashi’s avantgarde theatre—as well as many other artists, including literary giant Mishima Yukio—has since the immediate postwar era morphed into another project. The lingering heat of desire for premodern Japaneseness is evaporating and leaving behind a staging of the presence of the most profound absence.

This shift is partly attributable to what Peter Eckersall and Moriyama Naoto have identified as a new cultural force in which the economic sphere is global while the cultural sphere is parochial (Eckersall and Moriyama 2004:13). It is part of Japan’s most influential artists’ response to globalization. The apprehension created by participation in globalization while maintaining local culture and politics has altered our sense of history, identity, and aesthetics. The proliferation of new-millennium identities and epistemologies obliges scholars to know the local in the context of the global and the global in the context of the local. Looking at Japanese performance as one crucible of globalization makes the difficulty of this task apparent.

Japan is out of synch with much of the rest of Asia with regard to its memorializing of World War II. In those parts of Asia invaded and occupied by Japanese troops, many people feel their experience and memories of Japan’s atrocities have not received even the solace of acknowledgment much less material remuneration. Controversy over Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro’s much-reported visits to Yasukuni Shrine (literally “peaceful nation shrine”), Japan’s memorial to the war dead—including several convicted war criminals—reveals the deep unrest in Asia about Japan’s past actions. The debate about Koizumi’s visits to the Shrine centers on whether Koizumi is paying homage to the ties between imperialism and militarism that fueled so much Japanese aggression or purely honoring those who died for their country, and in so doing inspiring national pride. Koizumi’s visits to Yasukuni Shrine coincide with growing pressure from China and Korea for Japan to fully acknowledge its war atrocities. This cannot be accomplished successfully as long as Koizumi, the argument goes, continues to pay homage at a shrine where war criminals are memorialized alongside common soldiers. Yasukuni Shrine also contains the Showa War Museum with...
its troubling one-sided accounts of Japan’s militarist past. The Koreans have their own controversy with Japan regarding another form of aggression on the part of the Japanese military during WWII, and the Japanese government’s decades-long denial. In 1992, Japan finally released documents that proved the military was involved in the creation of brothels where Korean women known as “comfort women” were forced into sexual service for Japanese soldiers (Takahasi 2004:132).

How is it then that a 2005 collaborative production of *The Trojan Women*, directed by Miyagi Satoshi from Japan and Jung Yang Ung from Korea, avoids explicit references to existing disputes while acknowledging the significance of history? One part of the explanation, on the Japanese side of this complex question, concerns an aesthetic of ambiguity that is connected to a relational conception of identity that is spiritually and materially part Japanese, part pan Asian, and part global.

At the end of directors’ notes for *The Trojan Women*, entitled “Countries. Race. Gods.” Miyagi writes:

There is no doubt that these exist in this world. However, it is not possible to perceive “them by themselves.” We cannot (actually) see the countries themselves, or the nations themselves, nor the gods themselves, and yet we human beings have a strong desire to do so. (Miyagi 2005)

Countries, nations, and gods—geography, political constituencies, and belief. At one level, these are obvious tangibles. Yet, Miyagi constructs this trinity as a powerful play of intangible forces centered in the actor’s body.

That is, I affirmed that my utmost desire is for the audience to witness the actor who enacts what occurs to the body of a human who has, due to being placed in an extreme environment, seen something which is normally “too large” to be perceived. Beyond the plot involving race and nations, I want to see the possibility of a confrontation between the actor’s body and god. (Miyagi 2005)

In speaking about race, god, and nation, Miyagi is not only referring to what is eclipsed by the limits of language, but to the idea that theatre, at its best, is a powerful play of forces that cannot be known any other way. Miyagi’s actors, rigorously trained in the Suzuki method, are the vehicles for accessing realities that escape our ordinary perception. The more physically adept the actors, the more capable they are of performing what cannot be literally seen or written. This ability to stage the invisible is essential to some traditional Japanese genres, noh theatre especially. For Miyagi, the heightened physicality of the actors makes performance, apart from the text, an act that is determinedly in the present. In his *The Haunted Stage: Theatre As Memory Machine* (2001) Marvin Carlson points out that, “every physical element of a production can be used over and over again in subsequent productions [...]” (8). Particular performance processes change the signification of this repetition. In Miyagi’s case, the act of performance radically severs the actor from the past in favor of a present without boundaries.

Miyagi’s desire for a confrontation between the actor’s body and god echoes noh theatre’s unification of the noh chorus with the *shite* (the lead actor). By sharing lines in the first person, the chorus

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5. A placard inside the Showa Museum describes the “Nanjing Incident” as follows, “After the Japanese surrounded Nanking [sic] in December 1937, General Matsui Iwane distributed maps to his men with foreign settlements and the Safety Zone marked in red ink. Matsui told them that they were to observe military rules to the letter and that anyone committing unlawful acts would be severely punished. He also warned Chinese troops to surrender but commander-in-chief Tang Shenzhi ignored the warning. Instead, he ordered his men to defend Nanking [sic] to the death, and then abandoned them. The Chinese were soundly defeated, suffering heavy casualties. Inside the city, residents were once again able to live their lives in peace.”

6. For this production, Miyagi used seven members of his company, Ku’nauka, and Yang used two members of his company, Yohangza.
and shite also share a single consciousness, a convention that unites the ensemble in the creation of a character whose fluid boundaries make him not entirely of this world. Noh dramatic narrative and its ritualized performance make manifest invisible presence (see Bethe and Brazell 1978). Unlike conventional Western drama, which re-creates history or actuality, noh actors represent precisely that which cannot ordinarily be seen. Noh’s hashigakari (the bridge that leads from offstage onto the stage) is the path from the visibility of the green room where the actors regard themselves in a mirror to the invisibility of the stage itself—invisible because the stage is the place where the actor enacts what is no longer tangible but still hovers. In the green room, the noh actor is visible to himself as he looks in a mirror, but he is invisible to the spectators. On the stage, the actor is visible to the spectators as he enacts beings that erupt from an invisible world, but no longer visible to himself as a mirror image. The opulent material beauty of the noh masks and costumes help perform the paradoxical task of representing invisibility through fantastic visual effects.

Noh is consciously preserved as a tradition, an example, a remnant of a certain era of Japanese aesthetics. It would not continue to exist without intervention. But as the intervention is in the interest of present notions of past Japan, it necessarily erases the past while attempting to preserve it. In this way, noh participates in its own disappearance.

Miyagi’s decision not to stage The Trojan Women as an allegory for Japan’s war atrocities against Korea is connected to his relationship with traditional Japanese aesthetics. Miyagi’s aesthetic shares with the aesthetic of noh an emphasis on transforming the present through performance process.

Not surprisingly, Yang sees the production very differently. For Yang, the collaborative production is about women and the ways in which women suffer during war. In conversations during rehearsal breaks, Yang noted Korean attitudes toward the Japanese and toward women. Yang explained:

In Korea, patriarchy is still very strong. It is still a man’s world. I’m not a feminist but a humanist. Korea is still separate (North and South Korea) and we blame the Japanese for this.
Then there is the problem of the comfort women. But we can’t focus on only one problem. Korea and Japan have a very complicated relationship for which we can’t find a solution. We are still very close to the violence of war. (2005)

We can see Yang’s sense of the violence of war in one of his extra-textual scenes. In it, soldiers corner a young woman and cover her again and again with a seminal spray of water spat from their mouths. Yang’s image- and movement-oriented approach (he used contact improvisation as preparation for rehearsals) focused on dramatizing ban, a particularly Korean emotion that Yang explains as a combination of regret, loss, calm, sadness, and “unpeace.” His parados is a movement chorus of women in various configurations of bondage slowly crossing the stage to learn their destiny. This image is set against Hecuba (Suzuki Haruyo), standing center stage, disquietly gazing at what seems to be both the past and future terror of war. The large circular drapery of her white dress lyrically dramatizes her protracted grief. Even as she rages against the suffering of war, Suzuki gives Hecuba the full capacity for moral deliberation. In the midst of ruins she finally states what she knows about men and war. There is one brief reprieve from suffering when Cassandra predicts the catastrophes that will befall the Greek soldiers. At this moment, Yang has the women dance kunghan sulae, a Korean folkdance, associated with the rising moon.

Both directors anticipated that Japanese audiences (in Shizuoka and Nagoya) would think that the actors speaking Korean were Koreans and actors speaking Japanese were Japanese. In fact, the Japanese actors playing the female roles sang in Korean but spoke in Japanese. Korean actress Chae Kuk Hee, playing Cassandra, spoke in Korean but sang in Japanese. While the drama of The Trojan Women is divided into the Greeks and the Trojans, the production consists of both separate and conjoined directorial aesthetics. Miyagi and Yang divided up the scenes in equal portions. Miyagi directed the prologue, the third episode and stasimon, and the exodus; while Yang directed the first and second episodes and stasimons. While Yang’s approach to mise-en-scène tends toward the lyrical, Miyagi constructs intricate visual and aural dynamics with his virtuosic Suzuki-trained actors. However, Miyagi and Yang share the assumption that theatre does not have to be hobbled with realism or any literal correspondence between past and present or verisimilitude and theatricality.

Instead of the gods Poseidon and Athena plotting an unhappy homecoming for the victorious Achaeans, Miyagi’s revised and abridged prologue has General Douglas MacArthur (Obuchi Yoneji) and President Franklin Roosevelt (Abe Kazunori) stand in for Poseidon, and Prime Minister Winston Churchill for Athena, as the three scheme to teach the Greeks that victory is also a bitter lesson in loss. For Japan, MacArthur was the head of the occupation after WWII; for Korea, MacArthur was a liberator, first from Japan and later from the communist threat. Miyagi inserts a bit of ironic text in his abridged version of the prologue. MacArthur utters, “Old soldiers never die; they just fade away,” the words from an old army ballad quoted by MacArthur during his 19 April 1951 farewell speech to a joint session of Congress in recognition of his military career. Preparing to leave Troy, Poseidon/MacArthur reminds us of the enduring presence of soldiers and through them the consequences of war. This textual interpolation along with the famous image of MacArthur gripping his corncob pipe between his teeth—well-known in Japan—counters the death of the Greek heroes predicted by Cassandra. Miyagi situates the more recent war in the looming shadow of ancient Greek tragedy. MacArthur is gone but present, just as war is over yet ongoing.

7. From 1898 until 1945, Korea was a Japanese possession. During the Japanese occupation, Koreans were forced to give their children Japanese, not Korean, names. The goal of the Japanese occupiers was to transform Korea into a permanent Japanese province. After WWII, Korea was divided along the 38th parallel into communist North and capitalist South Korea. In June 1950 North Korean armies invaded South Korea, prompting the United States, using a United Nations vote as authorization, to lead the effort to push the North Korean armies back. MacArthur, then in charge of the Allied occupation of Japan, assumed command of the United Nations troops. At first, MacArthur was successful. But then the Chinese army intervened. After months of bitter fighting, a truce was signed with the boundary reflecting the battle lines at the end of hostilities—roughly the same as when the war had begun—but adding a demilitarized zone separating South and North Korea. To this day, there is no permanent peace, nor any plan for the reunification of the Koreas.
Like Yang, Miyagi critiques violence against women. When Menelaus (Abe Kazunori) finally confronts Helen (Sugiyama Natsumi), he is triumphant and enraged, repulsed and full of sexual desire. He cruelly chases Helen cat-and-mouse-like and parodies her dancing in an assertion of erotic conquest. Like Othello, Abe’s Menelaus is sexually driven in ways that twist his masculine resolve. The truth that emerges from his performance is that war creates the berserk desire to kill and embrace with the same hand.

Miyagi and Yang’s production of *The Trojan Women* is on the crest of a new wave of collaborative Asian work that draws from diverse traditional and contemporary performance practices. Its sensitivities, aesthetics, and politics are local and global. In Miyagi’s words:

I, who was born and bred in Japan, a country which in the past invaded Korea, was now creating none other than *The Trojan Women* with Korean theatre artists. There was, needless to say, a stimulating tension resulting from this history which pervaded the collaborative creation process. (Miyagi 2005)

The ambiguities of globalization can also be seen in an entirely different way in the work of KATHY, three young performers who are manipulated by an all-powerful but absent consciousness they identify as “Kathy.” The performers understand Kathy as something like a god who, via mysteriously delivered letters, dictates what they must do. This power is very different from Miyagi’s notion of god. For a performance in the spring of 2005 at Art Center Gallery in Tokyo, Kathy instructed the performers to form a *tableau vivant* while holding heavy books. In compliance, the three performers held stacks of books in unsustainable positions in a picture frame tableau in a courtyard outside the floor-to-ceiling gallery window until they began to shake and wobble with effort, finally dropping the books and breaking the tableau. The performers then grabbed three spectators, plopped identical blond wigs on their heads, and arranged them in the same book-holding tableau. The day I saw the performance, the spectator stand-ins struggled to hold the books for as long as possible. One man was able to hold his books until the performance was over. He took a bow. The others, after dropping their books, dutifully maintained their places in the tableau.

The books are material objects, not pointers to history or memory or even knowledge. That is not to deny meaning to the books. They are dead weight, the offal of culture. Holding the books up until it becomes impossible to do so suggests that textual knowledge has weight but not useful meaning. KATHY’s performances turn away from the rational—the forces that after the 1868 Meiji Restoration formed modern, industrialized, militarized Japan—toward the ubiquitous flat, free floating, and global Japanese popular culture, detached from the ways in which texts attempt coherent narratives.

In his article “Pop, Post-postmodernism and Junk: Murakami Takashi and ‘J’ Theatre,” theorist and critic Uchino Tadashi proposes that in contemporary Japan, the loss of a decisive gap between what is understood as normal and abnormal is partly responsible for the creation of art obsessed with one-dimensionality (Uchino 2003:116). For Uchino, “flatness” in art and life is the dissolution of layers of experience. Japanese pop culture genres such as *anime* and *manga* (animation and comic
books) and phenomena such as otaku (computer nerds and their culture) and H.I.S.ism (eschewing government intervention through deregulation) collectively create uniformity and depersonalization (117). The invisible force that controls KATHY is an example of what Uchino is writing about. We increasingly live in and in-between fictions and virtuality. The world consists of transparencies where nothing takes final form; it is a bewildering connected flat globe of instantaneous communication and all-pervading alienation where there is always another layer changing the picture. The transparencies add up to a flat opacity. This is a place where identity constantly shifts or can never really be anything at all: a place where identity can be part Japanese, part pan-Asian, part foreigner, part global, part historical, and part nothing particular. Flatness severs citations from their sources. Nothing is lost because nothing is ever known. We conceptualize ourselves in likeness of the one-dimensional mediums of photography, film, and animation.

The three KATHY performers—Okubo Yuko, Obuchi Hiromi, and Kanoh Yukako—wear identical performance uniforms of party dresses, blond wigs, and black tights covering their faces. Like the so-famous Hello Kitty, the performers in KATHY appear to have no mouths, making it impossible for them to speak. In fact, their faces are not faces at all. From one vantage point, the blond wigs look as if they are directly connected to the performers’ genitals because their faces are entirely covered with the crotches of black tights. The members of KATHY might be interpreted as a light-hearted critique of Japanese kawaii culture if it weren’t for the fact that their “cute” is also disturb-

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8. Uchino Tadashi explained in an email:

H.I.S. is a discount air ticket travel agency, which is supposed to have changed the thinking about traveling abroad for Japanese. Established in 1980, it now owns more than 30 related companies, including a domestic airline company, Skymark. Targeting young travelers, they offered unique package tours and unbelievably cheap deals. Before H.I.S., gigantic corporations backed by the government controlled the scene (and the price). H.I.S. is a symbol of neoliberalism and deregulation that eschews government intervention. (For instance, about 20 years ago Japan Air Lines was the only airline that was given a license to go abroad.) (2005)
ingly sexual. Their blond wigs suggest global disorder: a tension between the local and global in the way they mask their Japanese identity. Other places can only be incorporated into Japanese reality by wearing masks, by masking identity, by playing a game according to rules dictated by an unknown agent (who is oneself, a kind of revenge of the unconscious) with a Western name.

Kathy is clearly not omniscient. If she were, she would have noticed that the performers invent ways to subvert what she instructs them to do. After the spectator stand-ins were in place, the performers walked through the gallery window where, after draping the spectators in plastic (so they would not get wet), they engaged in a kind of mad hatter, crazy-dancing tea party, flinging tea all over the place.

There is a sly paradox in Kathy’s performances. Who is “Kathy” but the performers who compose Kathy’s commands? Yet the members of KATHY behave as if they don’t know what Kathy is going to tell them to do. In true theatrical style, they act “as if” they are only the handmaidens of Kathy’s commands. Spectators are supposed to believe, but not literally, that the performers are performing crazy commands from Kathy whereas, in fact, they are performing their own inventions.

In this world, both the performers and the spectators suspend disbelief. The performers disbelieve in their own agency as they obey Kathy’s commands and believe in their own agency as they create ways to subvert Kathy’s commands. Spectators agree to believe that the members of KATHY are following Kathy’s commands even as they don’t believe in Kathy. KATHY’s performances are designed to confuse the spectators’ notions of cause and effect, of action and responsibility, of knowledge and meaning. The books leave us only with the dead weight of our consciousness. Junk. And some crazy dancing.

Or maybe this isn’t right. As Carlson points out, memory is always operative as one of the parameters of reception (2001:5). Memory’s relationship to theatrical composition is the subject of Itoh Kim’s most recent work, Kinjiki (Forbidden Colors). The title, Kinjiki, summons two artistic giants, Hijikata Tatsumi (1928–1986) and Mishima Yukio (1925–1970): it is the title of Hijikata’s 1959 butoh dance and Mishima’s 1951 erotic “I” novel, a genre of 20th-century Japanese literature with revealing narration, usually about the author. Hijikata titled his dance after Mishima’s novel without having read the novel. The two men met only after Mishima heard about Hijikata’s dance.

Itoh’s dance is a series of solos and duets with Shirai Tsuyoshi. For major portions of Kinjiki, Itoh and Shirai dance like “riot guys,” antiauthoritarian aesthetic mavericks. Itoh is famous for using whatever movement style or genre fulfills his vision: modern dance, postmodern dance, butoh, contact improvisation. The dancers thwart both voyeuristic anticipation and the undercurrents of...
forbidden sexuality by beginning their dance totally naked, as if to suggest that one can never be too open about private things, to paraphrase Mishima (1951:5). After performing show-everything cartwheels, the dancers “play” their penises like air guitars to a strange braying sound layered with acid rock. A riff on male organs? Maybe. There are definitely no Sapphic surprises here.

Kinjiki refers to forbidden sexuality, to any sexuality that is apart from what is officially sanctioned. Mishima’s novel is about the illicit desire of Yuichi, an extraordinarily beautiful young man, on a quest for some form of undefined purity and sexual knowledge. His quest proves to be reality-transforming as his desire “eats away at reality,” as reality itself “bring[s] forth fictional forms dictated by his desire” (1951:28). Lighting designer Adachi Wataru’s use of vertical and horizontal rectangles of projected color plays with the idea of color as an indicator of sexuality as does costume designer Ohno Masayo. When the dancers eventually put on their costumes, their open jackets flash red-and-green lining as they dance. Forbidden sexual pursuit is a place where reality and fiction blur. Certain types of existence are dependent upon breaking “the laws of reality” (28). Mishima and Itoh seem to conclude that only a world of shadows remains.

While I don’t know Itoh’s exact relationship to Mishima’s novel, there are many places where Mishima’s novel and Itoh’s dance touch. At one moment while Itoh is dancing, Shirai’s shadow slowly steals an upstage corner. Shirai, like the fictional Yuichi, is exceptionally beautiful, with dark eyes and shoulder-length black hair. Shirai—or perhaps it’s Mishima, or Hijikata—is there and not there. At one moment, Itoh mimics hara-kiri, ritual disemboweling. But the citation is not necessarily only Mishima, who killed himself this way, but to the deaths of famous artists and their art. In this, Itoh is undoing the very idea of authorship. Kinjiki as preexisting textual material is in attendance without being literally present. Itoh’s Kinjiki seems to critique the ways that text and authorship are used as forms of discipline (in both senses of the word) to make writers and artists conform

6. Itoh Kim and Shirai Tsuyoshi dance antiauthoritarian aesthetic mavericks in Kinjiki, 2005. (Photo by Kamimaki Uyuu; courtesy of Carol Martin)

10. It is officially against the law to perform naked in Japan and therefore I was advised that there is no video of the dance, as it did not officially occur.
to established critical tastes. Itoh’s narrative and physical relationship to Mishima’s novel and Hijikata’s dance may be tangential, but his relationship to the aesthetic inheritance of their work is determining. Separating the idea of authorship and aesthetic inheritance underscores the way authorship in a virtual global world can be a regulatory idea.

Still, the question remains: Why Kinjiki now?

Itoh’s Kinjiki is an epitaphic performance marking the end of an era. In one of Itoh’s solos, he seems to unsuccessfully attempt to retrace his own steps, as if history can’t or shouldn’t be recollected.

Itoh’s Kinjiki is about signs changing, forbidden sexuality that is no longer forbidden, and a different (dance and art) world. Butoh, like modern dance and ballet, is practiced all over the world despite the fact that Hijikata, like Suzuki Tadashi, thought the movement style he created was uniquely Japanese and fit his idea of an “essential Japanese body.” Itoh seems to be celebrating butoh’s global reach as it appropriates and is appropriated by Western dance. While the progenitors of butoh are Japanese, the world practices the form.

The tension between the global and local spheres has created a gap where the invisible onstage is present in the extraordinary circumstance of performance, in the epistolary instructions of Kathy, and in references to past artists and their works. These performance strategies are not unique to the works I’ve discussed in this essay: they represent a strong trend in other contemporary Japanese performances as well.

The interdisciplinary and intercultural field of performance studies is also in the process of globalization. The hypermutability of the theoretical project of both performance (here I mean specifically theatre and dance) and the field of performance studies leaves us struggling to write in both global and local languages without claiming either as our native tongue.

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11. For Hijikata’s legacy see Butoh: Shades of Darkness by Jean Viala and Nourit Masson-Sekine (1988).
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