

Butoh as Mask to Interrogate the Spatial Divide Between Male and Female

- Nyoba Kan International Butoh Festival 2011 programmes

The Empty Room, Michael Sakamoto (USA)

ZIME, Simona Orinska (Latvia), Skaidra Jancaite (Lithuania), Modris Tenisons (Latvia)

By Richard Chua

In a recent essay, Judith Butler framed Hannah Arendt's theory that the alliance between people is not tied to a location, but alliance brings about its own location, within gender politics; she claimed that Arendt's distinction between the private and public domain left the sphere of politics to men, while reproductive order to women¹ (Butler 2012, 3). Besides the usual rhetoric that a body in public space usually is masculine, while the one in private is female, ageing, foreign, or childish, positioning the discourse on space within the debate of these two binaries, there must be a space where both male and female could co-exist.

I have yet to discover such as a space in the public sphere, but there is definitely one within the theatre. In the recently concluded International Butoh Dance Festival held in Kuala Lumpur, there were two cases which might show some light in the co-existence of both bodies in a common space -- in this case, the theatre. Artist Michael Sakamoto (USA), and Simona Orinska (Latvia), Skaidra Jančaite (Lithuania) and Modris Tenisons (Latvia) showing at the festival opened up new questions about male and female bodies revolting against their own body cultures.

Michael Sakamoto's opening -- dressing as a tramp -- was a representation of humanity. Every movement involving the dropping of nuts is a response to the state of affairs in America today, where people are suffering at the behest of the economic downturn and such. I might be making this up while watching the performance, but it was Michael's image that made me reflect on the human condition today. That mattered. The beauty of his images -- from the tramp to the woman in a remarking stunning red dress -- made people reflect on the state of physical bodies in modern society. It made my day with an ending involving a street hip-hop dancer. It was social criticism at its best, the American media.

To quote a line from Malaysian art writer Lee Weng Choy in his talk in The New Museum, in New York City: "To theorise is to mythologise." (Lee, 2011). I would rather think of myself as mythologizing Michael Sakamoto's performance in the festival, but the process of mythologizing is precisely what art criticism lacks today. However, it would be totally irresponsible to "mythologise" Latvian artist Simona Orinska's work ZIME. The plight a female body goes through in her everyday life is not the least allegorical, but physical trauma. Simona's poignant work is a reflection on the state of the female body under state governance and politics.

ZIME is a performance that excavates the body, its level of awareness and ability to learn. This is a creative issue that begs discussion in body politics within the performance art form. As the body adjusts to changes, it takes things slowly; however, when bodies get shocked, they take on different strategies in adjusting to these shocks.

In this seemingly feminist performance, the female body(ies) were exposed to tender shocks. Vocal artist Skaidra Jančaitė's intervention in Simona's body politics has likened that of a tender oppression. What makes the performance interesting was that oppression was met with tender retaliation. Simona's body movement was in tandem with Skaidra's. Both of them developed common humanity. Humanity, not in its stereotypical sense, a good old feeling that every person loves everybody, it is about bodies reacting to each other, to shocks. These shocks made changes to their bodies.

To read the performance wholly in the feminist trope, not to mention in the context of the state of Latvia on women, judging on the motifs designed by video designer Gita Straustina, might not be productive in attempting to understand these female bodies.

The common sense of humanity exhibited by these female bodies were testament that oppression (if I would be allowed to go further, violence) could be countered with tender maneuverers. The vocal, the body, the visuals worked towards that common achievement of compassion and humanity.

Both Michael Sakamoto and Simona Orinska's performances proved that gender politics had little effect on the space they existed, to the contrary to Butler's initial theory, not in the theatre, at least. They have also shown how the masculine could be interrogated and balanced by the feminine. In Michael Sakamoto's case, it was the female that balanced out the oppression suffered by the male body; while, in Simona's case, the masculine-spiritual aspect of the female body reacting against the tender violence levied upon it. The Japanese dance form Butoh indeed still has its revolutionary spirit in place. Michael Sakamoto and Simona Orinska have embodied it in their performances.

¹ Butler, Judith. "Judith Butler: Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street | eipcp.net." eipcp.net. <http://eipcp.net/transversal/1011/butler/en> (accessed March 11, 2012).