

Seabed

Performative Installation

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Seabed, is the first installation of my artistic research entitled “The body of the relationship. A practice-based exploration of the relationship between the body and its environment informed by the notion of *Butoh-body*.” This performative installation was based upon the elaboration of the first-hand experience gained at the intensive *Butoh* seminar held by Atsushi Takenouchi in October 2017. In this essay, I will first describe *Seabed* and then examine in which way it enables us to perceive our environment as a togetherness of human and non-human entities.

Description of *Seabed*

Seabed has been designed as an individually experienced installation mainly addressing stillness of the participant. When entering the installation space, which was slightly lit, the perceiver could still see some strips of light, quite soft and coming down from the ceiling. There was a separation black sheet between *Seabed* and the main room where visitors were later asked to write down some comments. During their permanence in *Seabed*, I was present within the room (regulating the audio input) but there was no direct visual contact between us.

The two walls were painted and covered with plastic transparent sheets in order to create a surface that gives the sensation of something in movement aiming to invoke tactile stimuli. The radiator was also covered to preserve uniformity within the space. The back wall of the room had an indentation, therefore I decided to cover it with thin paper in order not to interrupt this image.

The ceiling was sleeved with the same thin paper hung from one side of the room to the other. The distance covered was about three meters. As a result, a cloud or wave-like form was created due to the weight of the paper. The paper enabled a series of irregular patterns to emerge; this was meant to be an aesthetical choice that would give the whole installation the sensation of waves and flowing energy.

Under the softly lit ceiling, in the center of the space, there was a metallic structure veiled with a web of black clothes stitched together. Once entering the installation area, visitors were asked to bent, go underneath the metallic structure (hence insert themselves) and lie down on their backs upon a black velour textile. The textile was very thick and resistant and could partially sustain the weight of the person (mainly the extremities); being very soft and elastic, it is commonly used by acrobats when hanging from heights. The suggested position to assume was to keep knees bent and feet flat on the ground while the whole spine was completely supported.

The clotheslines were positioned over a web of fishing lines crisscrossing the metallic structure. Particular attention was given to the use of the void in-between the clothes. The interplay of the clothes' weight with absence-presence of light enabled a series of fluctuating patterns to appear, seen from the bottom (see Fig.1 below).

During their presence within *Seabed*, I was playing an audio piece (15 min). This way, participants' permanence within the performative installation was marked in a quite clear way. The name of the piece is *Accumulation* (2017), performed by Hiroko Komiya and Atsushi Takenouchi. *Accumulation* was the audio input that Atsushi often used during the *Butoh* seminar in our morning practice "Mother sea." *Seabed* is reflecting upon the Mother Sea experience through the posture that participants were asked to assume and the visual imagery suggested by Atsushi. I recall the piece has a powerful effect of building intensities as it increases gradually with an accumulation of natural sounds and an interplay of the sound of rain and musical instruments that leads to a crescendo. This was the reason I opted to use it in *Seabed*; aiming to evoke a similar immersive experience in the participant. Therefore, my suggestion is that incorporating *Butoh* dance practice into the structure of performative installation could be an enriching methodology to adopt.

Moreover, I was using two different tracks of the same piece with a slight delay. I have been using a mixer in order to control the volume and intensities coming out from two sets of loudspeakers (four in total) connected respectively to each of those tracks. This effect would cause a richer texture in the sound and a displacing sensation to the perceiver.



Fig. 1: Seabed, view of clotheslines and light from inside the structure when facing upwards. Photo: Eleni Kolliopoulou.

I opted for a soft lighting and especially for blue light which is expected to produce a calming or dreamy effect, as I tried to exclude any hyperactive or energizing effects. The perceiver was encouraged to focus to his/her body perception, let her/his weight to be supported and hopefully forget gravity for a while. Listening to the sound texture and allowing one's self to be transported throughout the time-space created: an intimate relationship with the environment was gradually built.

Another element of the installation was a small sized fan positioned at the back wall of the installation. The fan was producing a vibration in the air, a very slight effect of movement. Therefore, even if the visitor remained completely still within *Seabed*, there were some imperceptible movements occurring around them. The very concept of *Basho* is that of a place formed by enveloped forces: a field of consciousness in-action. In this case, the fishing line threads which are supporting the clotheslines are evoking this subtle interconnectivity among human (perceiver) and non-human entities (arrangement of the work); the whole composition of the piece within the space was thought as an agglomeration of enveloping, interconnected forces and intensities activating a flux of experience.

The audio reached the perceiver from four different sources within the space, placed at the corners. The intensity and volume of the audio were variable, enacting a milieu, a surrounding landscape in which the human body becomes a part. *Seabed* was not only a visual and sound landscape but marked an experiential

space. It increased the perception of hidden “intensities” (Engel 2018: 2) at a molecular level, instead of symbols, recognizable forms, representation.

In his dissertation proposal “Deleuze and the concept of intensity,” Engel explains that “for Deleuze there is a sense in which intensity is prior to extensity, or space and that intensive magnitudes, such as temperatures and speeds, but also emotions, create the spatial characteristics of reality that we perceive” (Engel 2018: 2). I am borrowing the term intensity here in order to offer a different referential point of view upon *Basho*, coming from the Western contemporary philosophical tradition. Both Deleuze as Nishida, as could be argued here, are not approaching space as a mere spatial coordinate wherein experience and its temporality takes place, but they rather call our attention to a field of intertwined multi-layered reality.

Seabed did not aim to trigger realistic imagery. On the contrary, it pointed to creating a disconnection from our ordinary way of thinking and acting. This was echoed in its title as well: a seabed, aside from being a part of nature, is also the deepest part of the sea. It is a place that conjures the image of a “repository” (Iwana 2002: 8) of memories and desires. Masaki Iwana, in his book *The Intensity of Nothingness*, outlines the major characteristics of the body in *Butoh*:

- 1) It contains both physiological and emotional entities while retaining an individual character.
- 2) It is a repository for nature.
- 3) It embraces the entirety of time lived from birth.
- 4) It encapsulates all elements of the soul, even intuition or spirituality. (Iwana 2002: 8)

The body perceived in its elemental existence is a living entity or a time-space container (Iwana 2002). In this respect, the body’s aging process or geological processes of storing climatic changes, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions at the depths of the sea may allude to seabed’s echoing with the concept of *Butoh-body*.

Equally, *Seabed* does not evoke the moment of realization but the very instance when those hidden “intensities” (Engel 2018: 2) within the body sprout out and get nurtured by it. The idea of being in-the-world as seen by Nishida Kitaro, who has been considered the most influential contemporary Japanese thinker who succeeds in bridging Western and Eastern thought, constitutes a philosophical grounding of the *Butoh body* (Kasai 2000). Therefore, *Seabed* should not be understood as the visual representation of the depths of the sea, but as a conceptual artwork interlinked with and pointing to a modality of embodied perception close to Nishida’s *Basho* (Kasai 2000).

Spatial Awareness in Seabed as a Reflection of Basho

Toshiharu Kasai, *Butoh* dance practitioner and theoretician, in his attempt to grasp the volatile essence of *Butoh*, identified a series of philosophical principles that characterize it. Those principles have been mainly expressed by the Kyoto School and, particularly from Nishida. The concepts that denote the *Butoh body* and feed the current research, are primarily related to the bond of the body with its surroundings. This bond (the performer's body and actual environment and hopefully the audience's body and its environment) is named *Butoh-tai*.

According to Kasai, there are four basic categories of the mind body set concerning movements:

- 1) The subject starts movements.
- 2) The environment and/or internal mechanisms start the persons' movements.
- 3) Both the subject and the environment/ internal mechanisms co-operate and start movements.
- 4) The self and the movements are not separated. (Kasai 2000: 4)

Kasai states that the fourth category of *Butoh-tai*, which is *Basho*, is transcending the dichotomized relationship of subject and object built upon an idea of human power over the environment that governs traditionally Western societies. Hence, *Basho* might be interpreted as a particular way of experiencing this interrelation: being within, in synergy with the environment, like in a circuit. With the term interrelation I am referring to the subject-object relationship – this long-debated issue in different schools of thought to date.

John Krummel suggests that “in Western metaphysics, Plato has been oriented around the dichotomization between form and matter or thought and reality” whereas “the root of Eastern culture harbors within itself that which sees the form of the formless and hears the sound of the soundless” (2017: 3). This formless quality is often being referred to as nothing-ness by Nishida. “The ‘nothing’ for Nishida does not mean utter nothingness or that there is nothing existing. It entails a dynamism that perpetually forms itself while remaining essentially formless.” (2017: 3) For Nishida “to be, is to be emplaced” (as cited in Krummel 2017: 7), even if that refers to an un-grounded place.

In *Seabed*, with regards to the concept of *Basho*, the metallic structure is placed in the center of the space. Besides, the loudspeakers are positioned in an equal distance from the visitors in order to create an “embracing” effect. This effect is accentuated by the fact that the perceivers are invited to enter a “cave-like” structure, finding themselves surrounded by clotheslines and supported by the black textile. The physicality of the performative installation as a constellation of differ-

ent elements/bodies is pointing to a place and functions as an ongoing invitation to be inhabited.

Ecological Materiality

All is equally important inside *Seabed* – co-operating in synergy. The co-presence of different elements with their intensities and materiality create a field of forces. The entities involved here are designed in their *togetherness*: fishing line-threads that sustain the clothes and merge into patterns that dialogue with the light that breaks through them. The four loudspeakers spread out in the corners of the room are weaving invisible sound vibration-threads. The shaken air produced by the fans is visible through its effect upon the textile that supports the body. The perceiver-body's micro-movements produce sound and meld within the soundscape of *Seabed*.

Jane Bennett, in her book *Vibrant Matter* (2010), refers to Bruno Latour's term *actant*, defined as a source of action that could be either human or non-human. Based on this term, she emphasizes that the agentic presences of non-human forces encountered in nature, within the human body or in human artifacts, mark an effort to balance the narcissistic reflex of human articulation of thinking. Contrary to the assumption that "objects are the way things appear to the subject," Bennett sees assemblages where objects appear as "vivid entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them" (Bennett 2010: 5). For her, "an *actant* is neither an object nor a subject but an 'intervener,' an 'operator.' An operator is that which, by virtue of its particular location in an assemblage [...] makes the difference, makes things happen, becomes the catalyst of an event" (2010: 9).

Bennett invites us to recognize that human power is itself a kind of thing-power by acknowledging that our bodies are "composed by various material parts" such as "the minerality of our bones, the metal of our blood or the electricity of our neurons" (2010: 10). By adding that an *actant* never acts alone but its efficacy depends on interactive interference of many bodies and forces, she draws our attention to "the concept of agency [...] which is distributed across an ontologically heterogeneous field rather than a capacity localized in a human body" (2010: 23). This field of agency or "vibrant matter" resonates with *Basho* that constitutes the focus of *Seabed* and the material environment of the installation. My engagement with environment connects the work, in some sense, also to Body Weather, the practice derived from Min Tanaka's influential Body Weather Farm laboratory, which is associated with *Butoh* dance. Fuller explains that Min would envision the body "as a force of nature: ever-changing, omni-centered, and completely open to external stimuli. Entirely opposed to hierarchization or formalization, it sees no part of

the body as more important than another.” (Fuller 2014: 198) The anti-hierarchical structure of the body that stays open and receptive to its environment resonates with Bennett’s positioning of the human and non-human bodies so close to each other, therefore susceptible to each other changing states. My aspiration is that *Seabed* would evoke this co-presence so that its participants gain direct access to its embodiment.

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