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## **Yumi Umiumare – Choreographic challenges to (mis)conceptions of Asianness in Australia**

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### **Abstract**

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Since migrating to Australia more than a decade ago, butoh dancer Yumi Umiumare has been interested in performing her Japanese identity ironically, making her own otherness part of an ongoing choreographic challenge to (mis)conceptions of Asianness in Australia. Her butoh-based choreography traverses her body's outer and inner landscapes to simultaneously expose stereotypes of Asianness, and explore the physical processes constrained by these stereotypes. Umiumare's strategic performance of stereotypes is risky, readily collapsed back into the culturally ordained images of otherness she is trying to challenge. Nevertheless, Umiumare clearly believes this strategy is the most effective way of making the otherness she experiences as a Japanese woman living in Western society palpable for her largely white audiences, making them uncomfortable with the (mis)conceptions they hold. This strategy is central to *How Could You Even Begin To Understand? Version 9-12*, the small scale traverse stage performance I consider in this paper.

### **Author**

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# Yumi Umiumare – Choreographic challenges to (mis)conceptions of Asianness in Australia

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Since migrating to Australia more than a decade ago, butoh dancer Yumi Umiumare has been performing her Japanese identity ironically, making her own otherness part of an ongoing choreographic challenge to (mis)conceptions of Asianness in Australia. She draws on a butoh-based performance style developed while working with prominent Japanese companies such as Dai Rakudakan, and with Melbourne companies such as Playbox, Not Yet It's Difficult and Chunky Move, to confront her mainly white Western audiences with “my Japaneseness, and my confusion living in Western society” (Umiumare 2001a, p. 9). In this paper I use an analysis of Umiumare's performance priorities and influences to contextualise the complex images of Asianness she and her collaborator Tony Yap created in *How Could You Even Begin To Understand? Version 9-12*, a small scale traverse stage performance presented as part of the *Mixed Metaphor* program at Melbourne's Dancehouse in 2001.

Umiumare's interest in performing her own Japaneseness is born of an interest in the way the otherness imprinted on her body by Australian society impacts on who she is, what she does, the way she is seen. “You say, ‘I'm me’, but that's not really the case,” Umiumare says. “You are not just you” (Umiumare 2001a, p. 8). Moving between precision, chaos and comedy, Umiumare's choreography creates complex images of her own otherness, including cultural yet intensely personal images of ethnicity, femininity, fluidity, infancy and memory. Through these images of otherness, Umiumare's choreography intervenes in contemporary debates about Australia's identity, its colonial past, and its location in the Asia-Pacific. By participating in this debate, Peter Eckersall says, Umiumare positions her work in a postcolonial domain. “[T]he fact that Asian-Australian bodies are rarely seen on the Australian stage and even more rarely in control of content situates these works within the rubric of postcolonial discourse” (Eckersall 2000, p. 146). “This draws our attention to questions of cultural and counterstrategic notions of identity within the postcolonial space of Asia and experience of its/our continuing dislocation in the region” (Ibid. 149).

In performing her own otherness, Umiumare aims neither to offer new images of Japaneseness, nor to abandon images of Japaneseness in favour of a truer identity beneath. Instead, she exploits the exotic, essentialised images of Japan stereotypical for some Westerners in her choreography, as well as in her talk about her choreography. “I often use a sort of traditional and exotic way intentionally,” she says. “Then trick the audience, or change to be totally comic. In a way it's a shock for the audience” (Umiumare 2001a, p. 10). Umiumare's choreography simultaneous copies and challenges the stereotypes Australians project onto Asian bodies — her Japanese body, and her Asian collaborators' bodies, as

compared to her anglo-Australian collaborators' bodies. Umiuare's choreography creates a precarious balance between presenting stereotypes, and pushing through stereotypes to unpredictable physical processes beneath. Umiuare's main concern always seems to be to perform stereotypes poignantly, provocatively or strategically, to show spectators that these cultural constructs need not constrain the life of bodies. Umiuare is aware of the risk involved in presenting essentialised, exoticised images of her own Japaneseness. "At the extreme edge our work as performers our performing bodies may be exoticised, orientalist and fetishised" (Umiuare quoted Eckersall 2000, p. 148). This, Eckersall notes, is why *butoh* "has become a contested, in some respects orientalist and overused terminology" (Eckersall 2000, p. 145-146) in recent decades. At the other extreme, though, Umiuare thinks her work with exotic images of her own Japaneseness may show spectators that the stereotypes are just that, stereotypes, not truths.

The powerful physical performance style by which Umiuare performs the Japaneseness inscribed on her own body is important in her challenge to this inscription. Umiuare's performance style is more allied with dance theatre than with other trends in physical performance in Australia in the past two decades — including contemporary circus, and practices that physicalise theatre itself (cf. Taylor 1998, p. 18). She calls on classical Western dance training, and contemporary dance and drama techniques as diverse as contact improvisation, cabaret and the Japanese *Taishu Gekijyo* (Japanese Public Theatre), to cultivate a physical intensity and imagination, and create an intimate yet intellectually charged connection with audiences (Umiuare 2001a, pp. 3-5, 12; Umiuare 2001b, p. 2). She understands these cross-cultural influences through the lens of the mid-twentieth century Japanese dance movement *butoh* (Umiuare 2001a, pp. 3-4). Given its name meaning dance of darkness by Tatsumi Hijikata in 1960 (Kurihara 2000, p. 12), *butoh* was grounded in the complex artistic and cultural characteristics of Japanese society at the time (Viala and Masson-Sekine 1988, p. 11). An early twentieth century interest in Western philosophies of self and society, and in duplicating the style and subject matter of Western theatrical genres through the *shingeki* or modern theatre had begun to dissipate. Young artists of the *angura* or underground were trying to reclaim the potential of traditional Japanese dance and drama in the modern climate (Martin 2000, p. 84), while radicalising traditional style, subject matter and student-master relations (Umiuare 2001a, p. 4; Watson 2001, p. 4). In their attempts to rupture traditional aesthetic forms, and foreground the abjectivity of the human body, *butoh* dancers were influenced by Western artists similarly disheartened with the forms that had inspired the *shingeki* (Martin 2000, p. 84). What makes Umiuare's work interesting is the way it embraces the stylistic diversification of *butoh* since Hijikata's early vision of a violent, visceral, erotic exploration of the veiled layers of human existence that would revitalise existing forms of expression (Umiuare 2001a, pp. 2, 4; Snow 2002, p. 283). She learned to take Hijikata's darkly theatrical use of *butoh* dance to even more theatrical extremes in her early work with *Dai Rakudakan*. "Dai Rakudakan was quite

theatrical, twenty people dancing on the stage, lots of cues, and quite technically working on quite big external movement,” she says. “Not copying kabuki or anything, but there are influences from that form” (Umiumare 2001a, p. 2; Umiumare 2001b, pp. 1-2). This history of highly theatricalised dance notwithstanding, Umiumare also always shared Hijikata’s respect for Kazuo Ohno’s intense, imagistic, spiritual style of butoh (Umiumare 2001, pp. 1-2; Umiumare 2001b, pp. 1-2), and saw the potential of improvisational butoh practices (of which the best known in Australia would be Min Tanaka’s *Body Weather* (Snow 2002, p. 66)).

Although these stylistically diverse trends in butoh emphasise external expression and internal intensity to different degrees, Umiumare thinks they are all driven by the body’s internal landscape. In her words,

[t]here are still often universal elements there, including the use of the spatial elements, and the fact that the performers confront their own emotions, rather than adopt a superficially choreographed style or superficial acting. In butoh every single movement has to be initiated by the performer’s own internal landscape ...Some companies work very externally, but the performers’ emotion is still coming from their internal landscape. Which is quite the same method, I think (Umiumare 2001a, p. 2)

According to Umiumare, butoh dancers access the inner intensity of the bodies to avoid becoming trapped in technique (Ibid. 8; Umiumare 2000; Umiumare and Norman 1998, p. 1). Umiumare recognises that technique theatricalises a dancer’s movements, and reduces a dancer’s physical risks (Umiumare 2001a, pp. 4-5), but she also believes dancers can become “stuck” (Ibid. 3) in technique, cut off from present moments and movements. For instance, though “not making a comment against ‘modern dancers’” (Ibid. 3), Umiumare notes that “with some of their movements they are moving only kinetically, they are not really moving from within” (Ibid. 3). “The life is gone, the organicity is gone” (Ibid. 3). “[I]n butoh,” she counters, “it’s basically a focus on ‘to exist’ or ‘to be’ and ‘to be yourself’” (Ibid. 3), though this is ultimately an impossible task. “You are not just you” (Ibid. 8). In her desire to disrupt technique, Umiumare connects with Hijikata’s injunction that “only when, despite having a normal, healthy body, you wish that you were disabled or had been born disabled, do you take your first steps in butoh” (Hijikata quoted Akihiko 2000, p. 56). “Because we’re able to move,” Umiumare says, “but in butoh you shouldn’t be ‘able’ to do it, ‘able’ to move. You should intentionally ‘disable’ your ability to do it, ‘disable’ your ability to move” (Umiumare 2001a, p. 3). Butoh dancers are typically well versed in the codified training of classical and modern dance — this is certainly the case with Umiumare, and was the case with butoh pioneers such as Hijikata, Ohno and Tanaka (Snow 2002, p. 282). But as a butoh dancer Umiumare believes she must develop the discrepancies between these codified techniques and the way her body brings them to life if she is to challenge the cultural images of Asianness imprinted on her body in the moment she materialises them (Umiumare 2001a, pp 5). This is where meditative, repetitive movement patterns become important for Umiumare, breaking through the cultural images of Asianness imprinted on her body to the liveliness

beneath, bringing this liveliness to the fore, if only briefly (Umiumare 2001a, pp. 3, 6; Umiumare 2001b, p. 2).

Umiumare's desire to break through technique to a lively body can be seen as essentialist, especially if it is understood in terms of the essentialising identity politics pursued by many performance artists in Asia, Australia, Europe and America around the time of butoh's advent in the 1960s. But it can also be seen in terms of her desire to expose the cultural imprints bodies carry, even if the liveliness beneath is itself culturally channelled. Seen this way, Umiumare's work is based on a strategic play with stereotypically Asian identities that pursues new possibilities for bodies. As Eckersall articulates it,

[t]his is also a form of strategic play with symbols and myths, histories and identities.

Such a poetics of displacement might perhaps rejuvenate butoh as an interesting and progressive site of performance, one that remains true to its historical moment but offers new directions for a corporeal politics of transgression (Eckersall 2000, p. 150)

Umiumare's work traverses the body's outer and inner landscapes to simultaneously expose and estrange stereotypically Asian identities. It is this very duality that disrupts the spectators' tendency to take the stereotypes presented as natural, and gives Umiumare's work the power to make otherness palpable, to make spectators uncomfortable with the (mis)conceptions they hold.

*How Could You Even Begin To Understand? Version 9-12* is part of a series posing the same question Umiumare has produced with her longstanding collaborator Tony Yap since the mid 1990s. In their words, this series "explore[s] some common views and experiences of Asianness in contemporary Australia" (Umiumare and Yap 2001, p. 7). Although Umiumare's other performances have addressed perceptions of Asianness in other ways, including the comic critique of cultural identities in *Tokyo Das Shoku Girl* (1999), and the powerful, playful images of a woman escaping to and from childhood in *Kagome* (1998), *How Could You Even Begin To Understand?* represents a return to an abstract style of performance. "Thus far," the dancers put it, "performances have been simple in structure and tend to be focused solely on the body" (Ibid. 7). Using this simple, sober, physically spontaneous performance structure (Umiumare 2001a, p. 10), the series has investigated the way the dancers' mainly Western audiences (mis)conceive Asianness (Umiumare and Yap 2001, p. 7). Umiumare and Yap both carry their Asian backgrounds in their bodies — her Japanese heritage, his Malay heritage. Both are well aware that their qualities are seen by Westerners as other (Ibid. 7). In the *How Could You Even Begin To Understand?* series they exploit this political yet intensely personal idea of their own otherness, trying "to redress these depictions of Asian[ne]ss and replace them with an exploration of contemporary Asia-Australia and points of view from other parts of the Asian region" (Ibid. 7). Their concern is to present stereotypes of Asianness in a way that makes their largely white audiences uncomfortable with the

preconceptions they hold, to personally challenge them with the question ‘how could you even begin to understand?’.

In *How Could You Even Begin To Understand? Version 9-12* Umiumare and Yap focus on “the philosophical principles of *yin* and *yang*, oppositional elements that are found in all manner of Asian experience and our performance experience” (Ibid. 7, original emphasis). Known in the West through the ancient Chinese *I Ching* or Book of Changes, *yin* and *yang* are central to Asian cosmology, and Asian notions of life, journey, change and human nature. According to Umiumare and Yap, although “this philosophy is well known to the exten[t] that it might be a cliché of Asian culture, there is a great creativity and depth to be found in reclaiming and revaluing such an essential concept through performance” (Ibid. 7). In previous performances Umiumare and Yap have personified the oppositional forces of *yin* and *yang* as animals — as the crane and the tortoise in *Kagome*, for example. In *How Could You Even Begin To Understand? Version 9-12* they explore the fluid, earthy, female *yin* force and the strong, fiery, male *yang* force in a more abstract way. They investigate how these twin tendencies interact, and how this interaction impacts living beings. “Tony and Yumi work in a kind of spontaneous counterpoint seeking to embody the shifting sensibilities of a *yin-yang* formula. They investigate the ‘superimposition’ within the *yin-yang*” (Ibid. 7, original emphasis). The dancers exist in counterbalance, each force struggling to overcome the other, each force at its extreme becoming the other, creating a cycle of change and growth. There is no clear linear progression to this change. Instead, personal identities and interactions emerging in the *yin-yang* exchange are contradictory, confusing, not easily collapsed into a system of stereotypical identities. So, as Eckersall argues in his examination of Umiumare and Yap’s performances in other parts of the *How Could You Even Begin To Understand?* series, “[p]erhaps their physicalised demonstration of *yin-yang* philosophy, where countervailing forces in the space become a question of mutual respect, diversity and reappraisal in performative terms can become a model for reconciliation and negotiation of difference” (Eckersall 2000, p. 149, original emphasis).

*How Could You Even Begin To Understand? Version 9-12* begins with both dancers sitting face-to-face on the floor, between two chairs at either end of the traverse stage. Umiumare wears a shiny silver dress; Yap wears black pants and heavy black shoes. Their clothes show up their striking, sticky, sweaty bodies. Although the space is silent and still, there is a blend of other sensory stimuli. The space smells of the incense the two dancers hold in their hands, for example. A dim, warm light frames these first moments of the performance, although the more violent moments later will be framed by a cool, spare, silhouetted light, bringing the show’s *yin-yang* binary into the space. After a few moments of silence the music starts. The dancers open their eyes, they slowly lift and lower their incense sticks, and then start to move to the chair at the far end of the traverse. The dancers plant their incense sticks on the floor in front of the chair. Umiumare sits on Yap’s lap. She rises. She very slowly

comes forward. She seems focused on something at floor level. Though this may simply be a sign of an interior struggle, there is a temptation for spectators to follow her gaze.

Umiumare's feet step over each other, shielding each other, in an almost childlike way. Even though "play is rarely associated with the physical or cultural dynamics of butoh" (Ibid. 145), as Eckersall says, Umiumare's movements are at times marked by "extreme playfulness" (Ibid. 146), perhaps partly a reflection of her early work with Dai Rakudakan. In spite of this sense of play, though, her left shoulder, her whole left side, seems torn. They drag behind her, drawn back towards Yap. Her right hand stays close to and clawed in towards her body. After a time she turns her gaze to the spectators at the side of the traverse stage, almost pleading with them. Yet she still has some of the childlike quality, the seemingly more feminine quality. A type of transference takes place, and the spectators have the sensation of being explored and evaluated by Umiumare's gaze. In the meantime, in the far chair Yap at first moves and makes slow poses. In time he rises, and he too starts to move forward into the space. Throughout this sequence, Yap's face appears as if he is attempting to speak. It has a more verbal, seemingly more masculine quality than Umiumare's. Moreover, his Malay trance-dance movements tend to be more to-and-fro than Umiumare's Japanese butoh movements, and more markedly, mechanically repetitive. Again, Eckersall has clearly noted this contrast between Yap's taut, trancelike, mechanical physicality and "Umiumare's physically expressive sense of ludic wonderment" (Ibid. 148) in his comments about other performances in the *How Could You Even Begin To Understand?* series.

The central focus of this work is always Yap's high-energy Malay trance-dance. As I observe Yap's work his body assumes the Malay-Indonesian dance form with such strength and concentration that it seem to explode — eyes popping, every tendon visibly pumped — even the act of standing motionless makes his body perspire profusely. There is an impression of something cybernetic about this performance ... I imagine a Deleuzian body without skin, the musculature an architecture of titanium rods and pistons ... [T]he body's mechanics in this work seem to extract pain and make it visible (Ibid. 148)

Throughout this starting sequence there is a strong focus on the mask-like faces of the dancers. Both have a high degree of facial energy, pain and fear, which differs between them, but which nevertheless has a palpable impact. This said, throughout this starting sequence, there is little sense of real interaction or dialogue between the two dancers.

Suddenly, there is a moment in which the "quite serious and quiet movement" (Umiumare 2001a, p. 10) of the two dancers shifts gear, a deliberate attempt to again grab the audience's attention (Ibid. 10). The dancers' movement shifts from internally focused to externally frantic. In this heightened atmosphere, Umiumare climbs into the audience on one side of the traverse. She surveys the space, registering the way Yap's movements are becoming more and more scattered, with moments of trance, restraint, repetition, spontaneity and convulsion. After a time, Umiumare literally falls back into the narrow traverse. The two



dancers shove, stumble, fall, crawl, roll, rise and reach, their bodily movements rapidly increasing in velocity and violence. Yap's movements are generally taut, trancelike, convulsive and pain-ridden. Umiumare's movements generally flow smoothly, swiftly through the levels of the space. Umiumare and Yap only occasionally take on parallel movement patterns. In this respect, the two dancers relate or respond to each other, rather than resemble each other. The two dancers eventually meet in the middle of the space. Umiumare has her back to Yap, as though trying to escape him, and with their arms and legs intertwined the two dancers bump, push and pull at each other. There is little chance of their yin and yang qualities collapsing into each other, or into mere opposites of each other, in a stable, stereotypical system of gender identities, or racial identities. Instead, there is an intense interaction between the two that affects them both, and then sends each dancer off in their own new directions.

Eventually, a roar from Yap puts an end to this phase of energetic movements. There is a blackout during which the two dancers stop in the middle of the traverse about a metre and a half apart, breathing together, breaking the atmosphere (Umiumare and Yap 2001, p. 7). As the lights come up again, the dancers channel the dynamic, rhythmic relation they have created into a movement sequence with more vocal and verbal components. There are a few exploratory sounds from the two of them, again accompanied by strong facial gesticulation. Yap sits in the chair at the far end of the traverse, and speaks in a language that means little to the mainly Western spectators — I cannot tell if it is Bahasa or but gibberish. He speaks not necessarily to Umiumare, not necessarily to the spectators, but out into the space. Meanwhile, Umiumare stands behind him, using her body to make an image in which she seems to be whispering these words into his ears and thus into his mouth. Then it is her turn to sit and speak, and though her words are loaded with passion, they are lost under the soundscape. While Umiumare speaks, Yap takes one of the incense sticks that still burn by the chair, and starts moving backwards, with slow steps in which his two feet maintain toe-to-heel contact, heading towards the chair at the near end of the traverse. The two dancers are losing their brief, fragile, fractured connection. Umiumare appears pained by this. Yap's pain seems less specific. The two dancers eventually take seats at opposite ends of the traverse, escaping their extreme proximity to each other and to their spectators more than at any other point in the performance. There is a sense of exhaustion, an affect felt by dancers and audience alike, in these final few moments. There is also an interesting lighting effect, in which a mask of coloured light is juxtaposed or projected onto the dancers' faces, as their sweaty bodies sit still in the chairs. This lighting effect is powerful, even if it is ambiguous and ephemeral. There is a sense of a bloodied face, a shadowed face, an other face, over the dancers' own fleshly faces. The projected faces and the fleshly faces do not match up perfectly. This makes the dancers appear even more obviously other to the spectators. Moreover, this makes the spectators more aware of the othering they project onto the dancers Asian flesh, and the discrepancies between the projection of otherness and the

dancers' own flesh. "As a performer, it is as if we are a mirror, as if our bodies are a mirror," Umiutare says, "and so the audience can project their feelings onto that. And if they achieve that sort of exchange, that's a great show" (Umiutare 2001a, p. 11). Eventually, the lights blackout, and only the last two points from the incense sticks at either end of the traverse are left to light the space.

There are two things that make *How Could You Even Begin To Understand? Version 9-12* so provocative. The first is the style in which the dancers perform their own Asianness. The dancers copy cultural stereotypes in an abstract way. They show stereotypes, show transitions in theme and tone, and pose the question 'how could you even begin to understand?', through a range of movement possibilities — standing, lying, falling, pushing and pulling, in particular hierarchies and parallels. These movement possibilities give an abstract image of Asianness, along with a powerful sense of the unpredictable physical processes at play within this image of Asianness. According to Umiutare, the constant leaps and loops in the sequence or progression of the performance confound expectations (Ibid. 7), creating tensions not simply between yang and yin, male and female, non-Asian and Asian, but between what has happened, is happening, and may happen. The dancers' bodies are open to the present instants or intervals inside the linear sequence, to the split seconds where changes in stereotypical movements or meanings attributed to Asianness may develop. "[I]t is," Umiutare says, "...an improvisational technique, opening up the possibility in each single present moment, rather than being stuck in a structure" (Ibid. 7). This shifting, spontaneous, strategic engagement with stereotypes of Asianness in Australia helps *How Could You Even Begin To Understand? Version 9-12* estrange these stereotypes for spectators.

The second thing that makes *How Could You Even Begin To Understand? Version 9-12* so provocative is the spatial setting in which the dancers perform their own Asianness. The show uses a traverse stage, with just two rows of spectators on either side. The dancers work on this traverse, with limited lateral movement, and this sometimes seems to trap the dancers in a line. The spatial set-up signifies some of the social and symbolic traps shown in the work. Certainly, Umiutare has used space to trap dancers before — lights created a cage on the floor in *Kagome*, for example. This tight traverse space amplifies the tensions the audience experience in engaging with this precise, yet highly personal and unpredictable work. The space is intimate, affective, and the spectators' proximity to the stage brings a palpable experience of the dancers' effort, their thuds, thumps and sweat. Moreover, lack of the comfortable theatrical conventions that spectators are accustomed to in the West means that there is not enough distance, darkness and anonymity to save them from uncomfortable engagements with and within the work. In the traverse stage, spectators see the work, and they also see other spectators watching the work. The intimacy of the space turns the spotlight on the spectators emotionally if not literally. It turns the spotlight on their own

responses to the exoticised images of Asian identity that are explored and estranged in the show. It is therefore critical in drawing the audience into Umiumare and Yap's attempt to challenge (mis)conceptions of Asianness in Australia today.

In a strategy typical of Umiumare's choreographic style, *How Could You Even Begin To Understand? Version 9-12* challenges conventional images of Asianness by developing the conflict between the dancers' bodies and the identities imprinted on them, and also developing the conflict between the differently imprinted bodies in the space — Umiumare's Japanese body, Yap's Malay body, and the spectators' mainly white Western bodies. As I have suggested throughout this paper, Umiumare's strategic performance of the stereotypes associated with her own Japaneseness in works such as *How Could You Even Begin To Understand? Version 9-12* is risky, all too readily collapsed back into the culturally ordained images of otherness she sets out to criticise. Nevertheless, Umiumare clearly believes this to be the best way of making the otherness she experiences as a Japanese woman living in a Western society explicit for her spectators, making them examine their own (mis)conceptions of Asianness and Asia.

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