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## Dancing at the Frontier: Lichen as Intermedial Enabler in *Uchi-soto* by Michel Butor, Pierre Espagne and Gregory Masurovsky

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In this article, the focus is on the photo-book book “Uchi-soto: dedans – dehors” (1995), the joint work of writer Michel Butor, photographer Pierre Espagne and graphic artist Gregory Masurovsky. The book’s title comes from the Japanese concept of “in-groups” (*uchi*, “inside”) and “out-groups” (*soto*, “outside”), referring to the dynamic intimate and public social circles one inhabits. I propose to analyse the book and its interplay with various art forms and cultural areas, drawing connections to Japanese *butō* dance, the grotesque, and the concept of suspension.

The analysis begins by examining the connection between the poem in *Uchi-soto*, written by Butor, and the Japanese *butō* dance form, known for its emphasis on grotesque aesthetics. Butor’s exploration of duality within “Uchi-soto” and his earlier text “Le rêve de l’huître” (1975) is referenced, emphasizing the dualities embedded in both *butō* and medieval European society. These dualities converge in *butō*, where the grotesque and the beautiful coexist without contradiction, resonating with the definition of the grotesque that combines the tragic and the comical, the real and the fantastic.

The article then delves into the presence of female characters in Butor’s poem, shifting the focus from benevolent figures to ambiguous and complex ones. The analysis introduces figures from the Arthurian legend and Loreley, examining their association with dissolution and dissemination. Butor’s choice to incorporate these figures underscores the impact of mindless aesthetic fascination and the resulting journey towards death.

The analysis explores the concept of suspension as a fundamental element in both *butō* and Butor’s work. *Butō* dancers are seen as suspended between life and death, emphasizing the grotesque nature of their performances. The text also references Kazuo Ōno’s performance “The Dream of the Mother,” where the body floats and rises, epitomizing this theme of suspension.

Another text by Butor, “Le Rêve des Lichens” (1977) is used to further the analysis of suspension in “Uchi-soto”. The body of Akiko Senuma, captured on the book’s cover, is suspended between the human and the lichen. This form of suspension is also present in Butor’s writing, characterized by extensive intertextuality and an absence of a clear authorial presence in the quotations he uses. This lack of authorship results in an ongoing process of creation, where words are suspended, forming a corpus without a definite origin or conclusion.

The analysis concludes with the idea that “Uchi-soto” revolves around the committal of the body to signs and signs to the body, a continuous cycle representing life and death, creation and destruction, and the balance between tradition and innovation. It emphasizes the importance of creation and the ability to find healing and transformation in the artistic process.

In summary, the analysis connects several of Michel Butor’s texts, analysing them in light of Japanese *butō* dance, the grotesque, and the theme of suspension as enabled by Butor’s treatment of lichens. Butor’s use of intertextuality, intermediality, and authorless, unacknowledged quotations underlines the ongoing process of creation across the frontiers of media, genre, languages, and cultural areas.

Keywords: *butō*, Japan, lichen, body, intertextuality

Throughout the works of Michel Butor, “si les lichens ne sont pas pléthore, ils déclenchent systématiquement une vision, une ouverture vers la profondeur, vers l’invisible”<sup>1</sup> (Zonca 93). This is exactly what happens in the fourteenth chapter of “Flottements d’Est en Ouest”, entitled “La décoration du Tenkuy-in [sic] au Myoshinji par Sanraku et Sansetsu”. In this text, Michel Butor carries out a “dialogue avec 21 classiques de l’art japonais”<sup>2</sup>, to quote the text’s subtitle. One such “classic” that Butor dialogues with is the decoration of the Tenkyū-in temple in Kyōto, more particularly the door panelling, which separates the different rooms of the building. As he makes his way deeper into the temple, Butor opens and closes a series of decorated sliding doors, which he describes to the reader:

Si j’ouvre les deux panneaux centraux du mur de l’ouest, ils vont se cacher derrière les deux externes, et j’apercevrai, au fond de la salle voisine plus grande, toute une famille de tigres parmi les bambous, et si j’en ouvre encore les deux panneaux centraux, ils disparaîtront derrière ceux d’à côté ; le père tigre tapi parmi les rochers, un léopard parmi des tiges de bambou énormes, et j’apercevrai au fond de la salle suivante un très vieux prunier à fleurs blanches parmi des rochers avec quelques petits oiseaux, et je pourrai encore ouvrir l’un de ces six panneaux pour apercevoir le soleil du soir sur la véranda (...) Et si maintenant je vais dans cette salle aux oiseaux et ouvre au nord la partie centrale de l’énorme branche d’un vieux prunier en fleurs avec un rouge-gorge et un faisán, j’apercevrai au fond de la salle suivante un lointain paysage à l’encre de Chine avec montagnes chimériques (...)<sup>3</sup> (Butor “Flottements” 132).



Fig. 1: Kanō Sanraku and Kanō Sansetsu, 17<sup>th</sup> century. Door panelling in the Tenkyū-in, “Bamboo and Tiger.” <https://global.canon/ja/tsuzuri/works/25.html>

<sup>1</sup> “although there is not an overabundance of lichens, they systematically trigger a vision, an opening towards the deep, towards the invisible” (all translations are my own).

<sup>2</sup> “dialogue with 21 classic Japanese artworks”

<sup>3</sup> “If I opened the two central panels on the west wall, they would hide behind the two external ones and I would see a whole family of tigers amongst bamboo plants at the back of the next, bigger room. If I opened the central panels there, they would vanish behind those next to them; the male tiger lurking amongst the rocks, a leopard amongst huge bamboo stalks, and I would see at the back of the next room a very old plum tree with white flowers set amongst rocks with a few small birds, and I could yet open one of these six panels to see the evening sun on the veranda (...) And if I now go to this room with the birds and open, to the north, the central part of the huge branch of an old flowering plum tree with a redbreast and a pheasant, I would see at the back of the next room a distant landscape in Indian ink with its wild mountains (...)”



Fig. 2: Kanō Sanraku and Kanō Sansetsu, 17<sup>th</sup> century. Door panelling in the Tenkyū-in, "Plum, blossom and bird." <https://global.canon/ja/tsuzuri/works/30.html>



Fig. 3: Kanō Sanraku and Kanō Sansetsu, 17<sup>th</sup> century. Door panelling in the Tenkyū-in, "Plum, blossom and bird," continued. <https://global.canon/ja/tsuzuri/works/30.html>

In all three sets of panelling, the painter has included lichens: on the rocks in the first (Fig. 1) and second (Fig. 2) sets and on the tree in the second and third (Fig. 3) sets. As Vicent Zonca remarks, the lichens resembles "des fleurs d'écorce, se détachant à peine de la couleur du tronc par un contour légèrement plus clair."<sup>4</sup> (Zonca 113). As he travels from room to room, Butor is always accompanied by these unassuming lichens which open a way towards something further, deeper, a vision, a landscape in ink with its chimeric mountains.

*Drawing on the power of lichens to orient us, let us consider the photobook *Uchisoto*. Published in January 1995, it brings together photographs of butō dancer Akiko Senuma by Pierre Espagne alongside texts by Michel Butor and drawings by Gregory Masurovsky. Whilst butō or other dance forms have been left out of recent studies on*

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<sup>4</sup> "bark flowers which barely contrast with the colour of the tree trunk thanks to their slightly lighter outline."

intermediality and intertextuality in the works of Michel Butor<sup>5</sup>, other recent studies have nonetheless identified guiding threads in relation to his approach to photography. First, that Butor's poems on or around photographs are to be considered narrative extensions of them, instead of mere descriptions or ekphrasis.<sup>6</sup> Then, that the central role of photography in the life and works of Butor inscribes itself within his engagement with intermediality, as evidenced by his collaboration to photobooks and artists' books.<sup>7</sup> Building on these studies, our analysis of the book aims to show how the organisation, not only of photographs and texts, but also of drawings, shapes it as a space where meaning and bodies are suspended as a result of the magnifying effect<sup>8</sup> each individual art form has on the others. This will provide an opportunity to study the genre of the grotesque in the context of *butō*, thus prolonging discussions on the grotesque in Japanese arts started by Gunji Masakatsu (Viala 15). We will also examine how this dance form, commented upon as it is by Butor and placed in dialogue with the Shinto belief system, can shed new light on his writing and its relationship with the body and the (sometimes) non-human Other.

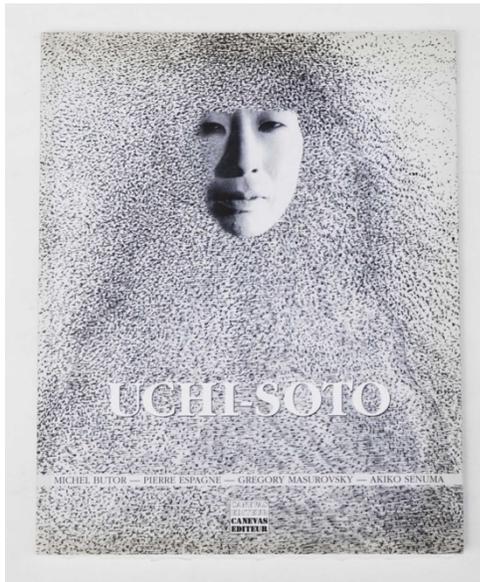


Fig. 4: Cover of *Uchi-soto*.  
[https://pictures.abebooks.com/inventory/31131459527\\_2.jpg](https://pictures.abebooks.com/inventory/31131459527_2.jpg)

<sup>5</sup> Chief amongst them being Kateřina Sedláčková. *L'oeuvre mobile de Michel Butor*. Masarykova univerzita, 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Bruna Donatelli. "Instantané littéraire : les 'légendes' de Michel Butor." *Le bal des arts : Le sujet et l'image : écrire avec l'art*, edited by Elisa Bricco, Quodlibet, 2015, pp. 275-92. <http://books.openedition.org/quodlibet/502>.

<sup>7</sup> Nicole Biagioli. "Pour une sémiotique butorienne de la photographie." *Loxias*, vol. 60, 2018, <http://revel.unice.fr/loxias/index.html?id=8909>.

<sup>8</sup> We borrow the concept of "magnifying effect" from a recent study on the grotesque by Rémi Astruc: "Le grotesque procède ainsi volontiers par 'effet de loupe', ce qui lui permet, comme l'instrument d'optique, de présenter certes le réel, mais sous un jour inhabituel et surprenant qui est, de fait, d'apparence peu 'réaliste'." (Astruc 34)

The cover of the book (Fig. 4) displays a photograph of Akiko Senuma's face, cropped closely around her features and placed within a drawing by Masurovsky which simultaneously incorporates her — the density of the dark strokes increasing around her to create the outline of an upper body — and is incorporated by her — as the drawing appears to be encroaching upon the left side photograph, across to the nose and up to the right eye. Masurovsky's drawing style, "fait de milliers de petites touches en trait: des petites boucles, des petites virgules, etc."<sup>9</sup> (Butor "Michel Butor parle de Gregory Masurovsky" 00:07), is similar to the growing pattern of the lichen *Graphis scripta*. Thus, the cover can be interpreted as a partial lichen. It opens a way into the book and points towards collaboration. As fungi and algae collaborate to create a lichen, Butor, Espagne, Masurovsky and Senuma collaborated to create the book.

However, collaboration is a neutral term which may not fully reflect the nature of the economy it describes, especially the economy of the different art forms the book deals with. If we take a detour through the Japanese language, we realise that the Japanese word for "lichen" is 地衣類. Taken separately, the kanjis which make up the word are 地 (earth, dirt) and 衣 (clothes, robe), whilst 類 denotes kind, type, sort, genus and also means "parallel" and "the like", as in 類推: analogy. The Japanese language, therefore, explicitly acknowledges the metaphorical connotations of lichens, as well as its appearance and position in our environment, namely that of an "earth robe". Lichen as an earth robe can be interpreted in different ways: as a robe for the earth, and a robe of earth. Considering our previous interpretation of the cover of *Uchi-soto* as a partial lichen, we can go further in our analysis of the interfacing of drawing and photography there. Masurovsky's drawing, as it creeps up on Senuma's face, can be said to enrobe it, to clothe the earth that it is. Akiko Senuma could therefore be considered as Mother Earth, a figure reminiscent of a passage from Michel Butor's *Matière de rêves*: "— Trouver un milieu qui lie tout cela ? dans la Mer"<sup>10</sup> (Butor "Le rêve des lichens" 772).

Although Butor aurally conflates "mer" and "mère" to invoke Mother Sea, he also calls up ligature and reading through the French verb "lie", just as a lichen attaches itself to its host and enables metaphorical readings. Moreover, Masurovsky's strokes remind the viewer-reader of tiny waves ebbing and flowing on the face of the butō dancer. As Butor puts it, "[avec ses dessins, Gregory Masurovsky] faisait tomber la pluie ou il faisait écumer des vagues."<sup>11</sup> (Butor "Michel Butor parle de Gregory Masurovsky" 00:19).

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<sup>9</sup> "composed of thousands of little line strokes: little curls, little loops, etc."

<sup>10</sup> "—Find a place which links all this ? in the sea"

<sup>11</sup> "[with his drawings, Gregory Masurovsky] would make rain fall or make waves foam."



Fig. 5.

Let us consider how the book opens, namely with a black-and-white photograph of Akiko Senuma and Gregory Masurovsky (Fig. 5). They stand with their backs to the camera, facing a white wall a few feet away from them. The lights, coming from the right of the camera, cast a double, decentred shadow of the subjects on the wall. They are both wearing dark clothes — black, perhaps. Senuma stands to the left of Masurovsky, a few inches shorter than him. Her long dark hair flows freely down her back and shoulders. As a result, she cuts a completely black figure, save for a few discreet highlights across her back.

What do the two people and four shadows depicted in the opening photograph signal? A collaboration between two people, certainly, but also, and perhaps more than that, a complicity. They are both accomplices, partners in crime but also complicit in the shared secret of their double shadows. They have turned their faces away from the silent witness of the camera which closed its eye on them. To close one's eye is to wilfully ignore or overlook something, in the knowledge that it should not be ignored or overlooked. The camera is there and sees everything, yet this time, like every other time, it saw nothing. It is also complicit. Yet it tells that there is a secret, without revealing it. As we stare at their backs, the secret stares back at us, and "*la méfiance passe derrière l'épaule*"<sup>12</sup> (Butor et al.)<sup>13</sup>. We are wary of those people whose face we cannot see, who seem to be conspiring in front of the album (it is white) on the wall:

Everything remains possible, this album (the white of an album is always virginal) offers an immaculately matrix-like surface (...) for all the stories that you would like to project there, for all imaginable intrigues, 'plots' and schemes... (Derrida "*Aletheia*" 178).

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<sup>12</sup> "wariness goes over the shoulder"

<sup>13</sup> The pages of this book are not numbered.

This wall is the matricial surface which links inside and outside (in other words, *uchi* and *soto*) by enabling the *affleurement* of the subject Akiko Senuma to the surface of the book. Standing in front of the white wall, she is *drawn* into it and through it, to its outward surface, the cover of the book, where she appears in the manner we have described. Akiko Senuma meets us, the reader-viewer, on the other side of the photograph to lead us deeper into the book, like the lichens on the Tenkyū-in temple door panels lead the visitor deeper into the building. It is, therefore, only fitting that Akiko-san should be lichenized in such a way as she takes on her role as a psychopomp.

*Uchi-soto* marks Michel Butor's first and only published interaction with the art of *butō*. In the book, this interaction takes the form of nine poems which all follow the same pattern: a monostich followed by a couplet, repeated five times and ending with a monostich for a total of 19 lines. The lines which make up the couplets are all used at least twice throughout the text, with variations (e.g. "l'eau cascading de lèvre en lèvre"<sup>14</sup> and "l'eau cascading de lèvre en paupière"<sup>15</sup>). The only exception to this is "l'imprégnant d'une effervescence funèbre"<sup>16</sup>, which appears only once. The monostichs are very short and mostly time and place markers, such as "dedans", "dehors", "à la frontière" or "maintenant"<sup>17</sup>. There are five notable exceptions to this: "au secours! la maison accuse", "au secours! la maison brûle", "au secours! la maison divague", "au secours! la maison se renverse" and "au secours! la maison sombre"<sup>18</sup>.

The theme of a menacing and precarious inside or house can be found elsewhere in the work of Michel Butor in a 1975 text entitled "Le rêve de l'huître"<sup>19</sup> which constitutes the first chapter of the first volume of *Matière de rêves*. In this dream, Michel Butor, "après avoir donné une conférence, ne peut se rendre à [la réception organisée pour lui] à cause d'obstacles invraisemblables, et y est remplacé par un double fort antipathique."<sup>20</sup> (Butor *Matière de rêves* 433). Towards the very end of the text, the house where the reception is held is destroyed: "Puis c'est la maison qui s'écroule et nous partons dans les jardins."<sup>21</sup> (Butor *Matière de rêves* 454). Twenty years after "Le rêve de l'huître", *butō* provides Butor with an opportunity to revisit the text's themes of duality between inside and outside, house and garden, and him and his double.

The first part of the poem recounts a beginning: "Dedans/une présence en train de se coaguler"<sup>22</sup> (Butor et al.). This choice of verb connotes that an organic process is taking place. A sort of self-generation, as made explicit by the recourse to the reflexive

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<sup>14</sup> "water cascading from lip to lip"

<sup>15</sup> "water cascading from lip to eyelid"

<sup>16</sup> "imbuing it with gloomy agitation"

<sup>17</sup> "inside", "outside", "at the frontier", "now"

<sup>18</sup> "help! the house is accusing", "help! the house is burning", "help! the house is rambling", "help! the house is capsizing", "help! the house is sinking"

<sup>19</sup> First published in 1974 in *Les Cahiers du Chemin*.

<sup>20</sup> "after having given a conference, cannot go the reception organised for him due to a series of improbable obstacles and is replaced there by a very unpleasant doppelgänger."

<sup>21</sup> "Then, the house crumbles down and we end up in the garden."

<sup>22</sup> "Inside/a presence coagulating"

form, occurs right at the start of the poem. Its meaning is threefold. First, it metaphorizes the poem itself, *poiesis* more generally, and therefore all literature. The poem is the result of a process of accretion. Like a pearl inside an oyster (we may be allowed this comparison as Butor places the coagulation “Dedans”), the poem is created as layers accumulate, and in this case, these layers are made up of signifiers and signifieds. This brings us to a second interpretation of the poem as a re-telling of “Le rêve de l’huître”. This earlier text also tells of the self-generation of a “présence”, which turns out to be hostile to its model. Third, the verb “coaguler” is a reminder of the organic origins of butō: in the words of Tatsumi Hijikata, one of the founding figures of butō, “Butoh plays with time; it also plays with perspective, if we, humans, learn to see things from the perspective of an animal, an insect, or even inanimate objects. The road trodden every day is alive...we should value everything.” (Viala 65). This bridge that Michel Butor builds between writing and performance is furthered more explicitly in the third line of the poem: “le foyer de la danse accueille ses fureurs”<sup>23</sup> (Butor et al.). The word “fureur” connotes again the nature of butō as a dance form which “began in a spirit of revolt” (Viala 17) to break away from traditional Western and Japanese dance forms which had prevailed in Japan since at least the Meiji era.

Furthermore, this third line not only relates the beginnings of butō, but it also starts to set a stage for it, and this stage-setting continues on line 4: “au secours ! la maison sombre” (Butor et al.). The word “sombre” introduces an obvious double meaning. As a verb, it is a warning that the house is sinking, going under. As an adjective, it signals that the house lights have dimmed and that the performance is about to start.

Later, Butor explicitly mentions Béatrice, thus concertises the poem’s filiation with Dante Alighieri’s *Divine Comedy*: “progressant prudemment sur le sentier des ténèbres/Béatrice nous guide à travers les sphères des affres”<sup>24</sup> (Butor et al.). The journey promises to be arduous. We — the reader-traveller — are to be taken through its throes. Hope, however, seems to glimmer on the horizon, in the form of daybreak and time washing over the slopes of destruction: “le jour se lève sur la mère des braises/les heures glissent au long des montagnes de laves”<sup>25</sup> (Butor et al.). Whether time heals all wounds, as the saying goes, remains to be seen.

One drawing and nine photographs of Akiko Senuma separate the second and third parts of the poem. This reflects the structure of Dante’s Heaven, which is made up of nine and one spheres, the latter being different in nature to the other nine.<sup>26</sup>

Upon observing the first photograph, we immediately notice the discrepancy between the subject and her shadow (Fig. 6).

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<sup>23</sup> “The home of dance welcomes its frenzies”

<sup>24</sup> “advancing cautiously on the path of darkness/Beatrice guides us through the spheres of purgatory”

<sup>25</sup> “day breaks on the sea of embers/hours slide along the lava mountains”

<sup>26</sup> The last sphere of Heaven, the Empyrean, lies beyond the physical universe, in contrast to the others.



Fig. 6.

Something extends out on the wall from the shadow of her nose. At first glance, the shape looks like bent fingers, but on closer examination, we discover that those fingers would need to have four phalanxes whereas human fingers have three. Another external intrusion is represented in the fourth photograph (Fig. 7). Gregory Masurovsky extends his right hand and forearm flat against the wall, entering the top right-hand corner of the frame horizontally to meet Akiko Senuma's hand, stopping shy of touching it.



Fig. 7.

The shadow cast by Masurovsky's forearm, thanks to the placement of the light source on the surface of the wall, extends in a dark corridor towards Senuma, whose hand is placed at its centre. It is a meeting in darkness — Masurovsky's darkness, since he casts

the shadow. The darkness produced by the hand on the wall is akin to the one it produces on the paper when it holds a pen nib.



Fig. 8.

And because this pen nib was dipped earlier in the darkness of the woman (Fig. 8), this darkness is not only Masurovsky's; it is shared, reflected back to her "sur le sentier des traces"<sup>27</sup>, the dark band from which traces emerge, like the ink ribbon of a typewriter.

Masurovsky's physical presence, after the shadowy intrusion in the first photograph, seems to suggest that the two are related. Out of the distorted shadow of the woman, something is born, which in turn bears the woman in its dark glow. It is the re-birth of man from woman. Just as Dante is re-born in the Empyrean thanks to Beatrice, the woman in the photograph enables man to be re-born. Further on, after the third part of the poem, another series of photographs seems to support this.

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<sup>27</sup> "on the path of traces"

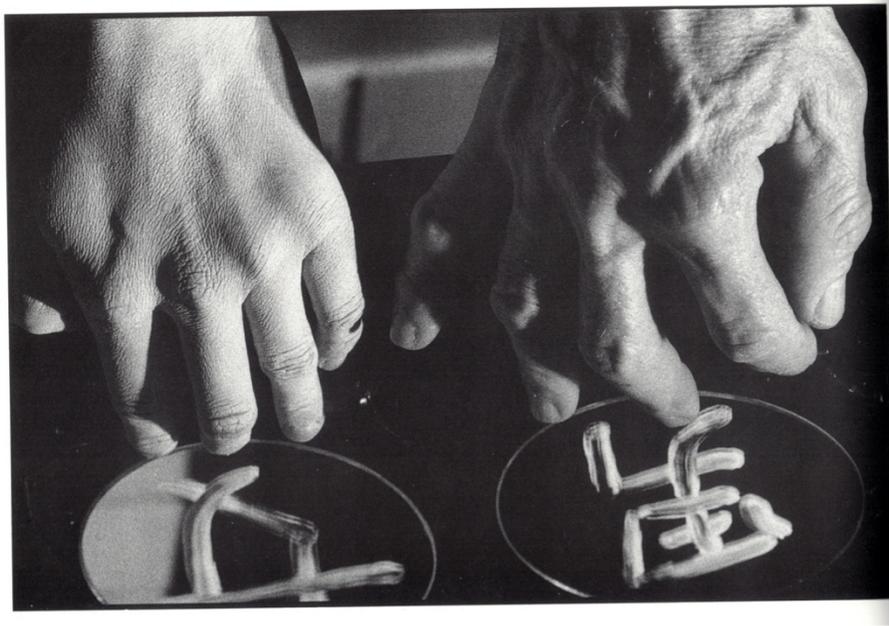


Fig. 9.

On a dark table, two glass discs are each inscribed in white body paint with the kanji for woman and man: 女 and 男 (Fig. 9). Akiko Senuma's hand hovers over the disc marked 女 and Masurovsky's over the other. Senuma's hand appears covered in the same white paint used to draw the kanjis. It is as though she drew them, in a lesson to the naked hand which swiftly proceeds, in the next photograph, to cover itself with the same white paint. Thus, as the woman shows the way, man is re-born out of his darkness and into the light of the white paint. The hand which darkens the page is lightened by make-up and "les signes du fard explicitent ceux de l'épiderme"<sup>28</sup> (Butor et al.) as Butor writes in the third part of the poem. The make-up signs, 女 and 男, make explicit what the whitened skin signifies, namely the complicity of woman and man in what is unfolding: "des paysages vus d'avions frissonnent dans leur complicité"<sup>29</sup> (Butor et al.); a complicity which harkens back to the very first photograph of the two artists in the book.

Later, a few pages before the fourth part of the poem begins, we see two juxtaposed photographs of Akiko Senuma: one where her eyes are closed (Fig. 10), and the other where they are open (Fig. 11).

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<sup>28</sup> "the signs of the make-up make explicit those of the skin"

<sup>29</sup> "landscapes seen from planes shiver with complicity"

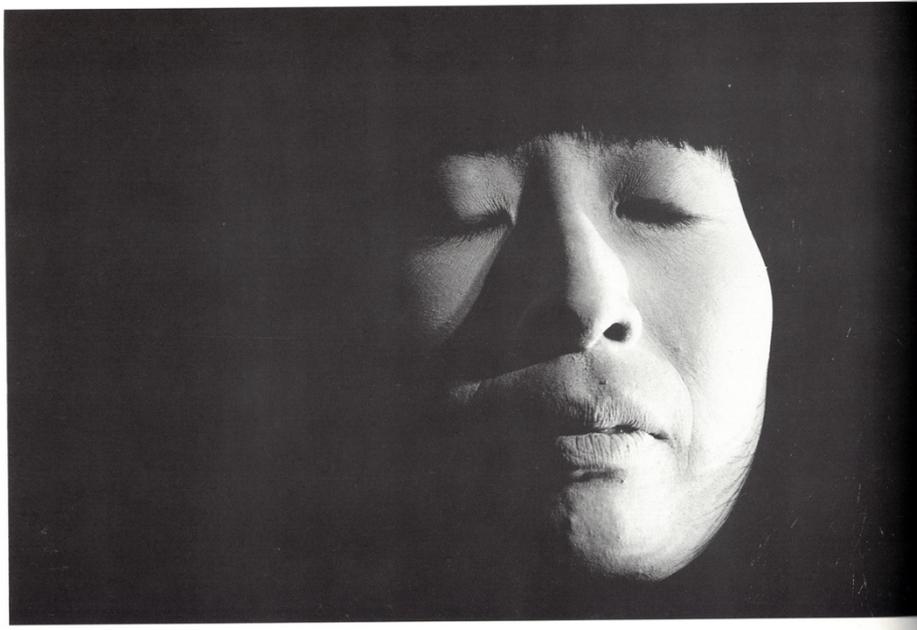


Fig. 10.



Fig. 11.

We said earlier that as he engages with *butō* in *Uchi-soto*, Butor revisits the theme of duality he explored in one of his previous texts called “Le rêve de l’huître”. For Francis Ponge, the oyster represents a cosmogony founded on duality: “À l’intérieur l’on trouve tout un monde, à boire et à manger”<sup>30</sup> (Ponge 43). The same could be said of *Uchi-soto*, as it is a work (and therefore a world inasmuch as it is self-contained) placed under the two signs of the inside and the outside: 内 and 外. Moreover, for Mikhail Bakhtin, the whole of European society in the Middle Ages revolved around a dual world in which “Carnival festivities and (...) [c]hurch feast[s with their] comic folk aspect[s] (...) offered a completely different, nonofficial, extra-ecclesiastical and extra-political aspect of the world, of man, and of human relations; they built a second world and a second life outside officialdom” (Bakhtin 6 emphasis mine). Just as the duality of medieval European society had its roots in folk culture, so do *Butō*’s main aesthetic features:

The provocative use of “bad taste,” the ugly, the grotesque, and the inversion of aesthetic and social values, on the surface so un-Japanese, is deeply rooted in certain traditions in Japan still surviving in various regions. What is named by several critics (i.e., Masakatsu Gunji) *shūaku no bi* (aesthetics of ugliness) is a legitimate feature of both folk tradition and classical art. (Viala 15).

Therefore, *butō* is at once derived from folk tradition and classical Japanese art as it embraces *shūaku no bi*, which is itself a notion steeped in duality, for it brings together the ugly and the beautiful<sup>31</sup> without seeking to oppose them or conflate them through a form of aesthetic relativism which would claim that beauty (or ugliness) is in the eye of the beholder. Inasmuch as *shūaku no bi* comprehends both beauty and ugliness in the way we have just described, it shares a definition of the grotesque according to Rémi Astruc:

Or le grotesque est tragique et comique, triste et gai, absurde et signifiant, réaliste et fantastique, de même qu’il allie la vie et la mort. C’est pourquoi il s’exprime de toute éternité à travers ces figures du mélange improbable, de l’hybridation surnaturelle et des métamorphoses (depuis la sirène mi-femme mi-oiseau – et plus tard mi-poisson – jusqu’à l’homme-insecte inventé par Kafka), à quoi il faut ajouter (...) la figure du redoublement.<sup>32</sup> (Astruc 39).

We pointed out earlier how *butō* seeks to make humans “see things from the perspective of an animal, an insect, or even inanimate objects.” (Viala 65) in order,

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<sup>30</sup> “Inside one finds a whole world with its good and bad sides”

<sup>31</sup> “Chose curieuse et vraiment digne d’attention que l’introduction de cet élément insaisissable du beau jusque dans les œuvres destinées à représenter à l’homme sa propre laideur morale et physique !” (Baudelaire 360) (“The introduction of this elusive element of the beautiful in works meant to show mankind its own moral and physical ugliness is a strange and noteworthy thing!”)

<sup>32</sup> “But the grotesque is tragic and comical, sad and cheerful, absurd and meaningful, realistic and fantastical, and it marries life and death. This is why it deals with any eternity through such figures as improbable mixing, supernatural hybridization and metamorphoses (from the half-woman, half-bird — and later half-fish — siren, to the man-insect of Kafka) to which must be added (...) the figure of the double.”

perhaps, to able to “dance Hamlet in a world of frogs” (Viala 55), to quote Kazuo Ōno. The hybridity which is ever-present in *butō*, together with the *effet d'étrangeté* emanating from it, militate towards a renewed understanding of this dance form as one which borrows from the grotesque aesthetic and phenomenological elements.

Michel Butor understood the grotesqueness of *butō* we have described, and it is addressed in his poem. Whilst Parts 2 and 3 reference Dante's Beatrice, a benevolent figure guiding the protagonist through Purgatory, from Part 4 onwards Butor presents the reader with an altogether different set of female characters. In Part 4, we must note the presence of a reference to Francis Ponge's oyster as a “monde (...) qui flue et reflue à l'odeur et à la vue” and where “[p]arfois très rare une formule perle à leur gosier de nacre”<sup>33</sup> (Ponge 43) : “la planète s'enrobe de lanciers de parfums/à la recherche de son apparence dans une perle”<sup>34</sup> (Butor et al.). This concretises the link between the poem and Butor's earlier “Le rêve de l'huître” and reaffirms the importance for him of the motif of the oyster in his exploration of duality and world-making. Still in Part 4, we find the first reference to another female character: “sur l'échiquier de la fenêtre la reine assure ses atours/son gnome secret enfle sur la piste”<sup>35</sup> (Butor et al.). Our ignorance of the identity of this queen and her gnome is maintained until Part 5, where Butor writes: “le geste se développe en pétale de lys/c'est la dissolution de la Fée Morgane”<sup>36</sup> (Butor et al.). The metaphor of motion as a lily petal is one *butō* practitioners would have used, as it translates the animate into the inanimate. Butor also establishes a relationship of equivalence or concomitance between the actions of the first and second lines through the use of “c'est” (*it is*). In the Arthurian legend, Morgan le Fay is an ambiguous character. Initially depicted as a benevolent entity who heals King Arthur on Avalon, she then turns against him and his wife Queen Guinevere. If this reference to Arthurian legend helps to explain the identity of the queen in Part 4 of the poem, we must look five pages further to meet her gnome (Fig. 12):

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<sup>33</sup> “world which ebbs and flows to the smell and sight” and where “sometimes very rarely a phrase forms in their mother-of-pearl gullets”

<sup>34</sup> “the planet drapes itself in perfume throws/seeking its appearance in a pearl”

<sup>35</sup> “on the chessboard of the window the queen secures her attire/her secret gnome swells up on the track”

<sup>36</sup> “the gesture develops into a lily petal/it is the dissolution of Morgan le Fay”



Fig. 12.

“son gnome secret enfle sur le mur” writes Butor in Part 6 as Akiko Senuma casts a distorted, gnome-shaped shadow on the wall behind her. The secret gnome dwells in shadows, if he is not a shadow himself. Through the introduction of this secondary character, Michel Butor projects a magnifying effect on the photographs, in the way we touched upon earlier. This brings to the fore the grotesque dimension of a *butō* performance which, through its *mise-en-scène*, produces comically squat shadows. The reader-viewer is at once amused, disconcerted and intrigued at the sight of this spectacle, and the remanence of the secret gnome imbues the rest of the photographs in Part 6 with the same feeling of strangeness. Moreover, the creation of these shadows can be construed as natural, according to an interpretation of Shinto: “Yet if we join Shinto in considering human beings as part of nature instead of separate from it, even human inventiveness can be natural—at least if performed with the genuine mindful heart.” (Kasulis 43). Considering the principles of *butō* we listed earlier, this particular Shinto principle applies. The natural inventiveness of the dancer and the photographer — the resonance of their mindful hearts, or *kokoro* — have colluded to produce the shadow and let nature speak, or rather show its face:

L'empire des signes est conscient de ses bornes (...) Cet empire partiel et pluriel est comme l'archipel japonais, formé d'îlots de significations, flottant sur ce qui du réel demeure à jamais

insensé : le visage inhumain de la nature, surgissant dans l'homme lui-même, et l'irréparable violence de l'impermanence.<sup>37</sup> (Pinguet 41).

The face of nature is not human, as we have just described, but it seems to be calling to us still, as it presents itself to us head on whereas the dancer is turned to the side and appears to be walking towards the edge of the frame. This is a face in its Levinasian understanding: it calls us to responsibility.

In Part 7, Butor uses another legendary female character: "c'est la dissolution de Loreley/une présence en train de se disséminer"<sup>38</sup> (Butor et al.). Loreley is a siren-like creature said to inhabit the eponymous rock overlooking the Rhine, from where she lures mariners to their deaths on the rocky banks of the river with her beauty and song. In incorporating her in his poem, Butor signals a movement towards death as the result of mindless aesthetic fascination. Here, he also makes explicit that "dissolution" for him means "dissemination", as a solid dissolves in liquid to create what chemists call a suspension.<sup>39</sup>

It is precisely this idea of suspension that is central to *butō*. The grotesque quality of *butō* stems from its suspension between beauty and ugliness, human and non-human, life and death. Michel Butor, as he magnifies these qualities in the photographs through text, helps to redeem them from aestheticism and builds a bridge between this Japanese dance form and the grotesque as a European artistic category. Furthermore, the *butō* performance itself is a suspension: that of a body in space. According to Tatsumi Hijikata, one of the architects of *butō*: "Butoh is a corpse standing straight up in a desperate bid for life." . In other words, a body between life and death. This is an underlying constant of many *butō* pieces. An early and seminal *butō* performance by Tatsumi Hijikata saw him carry out a "barbarous dance, leaping suddenly onto immense metal plates suspended from the flies, which fling out in an image of unbound chaos (...)" before ending the piece "spread-eagled by ropes which pull him toward the rear of the house, above the heads of the audience, this parody of the Ascension marking his farewell to the West." (Viala 71). The reference to the Christian belief of the Ascension, which consists of a person entering Heaven alive, places the dancer's body in the afterlife (a form of death) during his lifetime.

Later, in 1982, Kazuo Ōno becomes the Mother — his mother — in his performance "The Dream of the Mother": "She dreams. She dreams of Ophelia, floating on the river. (...) The Mother changes into Ophelia, and as beautiful as she, rises toward the light" (Viala 44). The motif of a body floating and rising between life and death is used again here by Ōno on his journey to retrace "the very source and essence of his dance" (Viala 41) right back to his mother's womb.

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<sup>37</sup> "The empire of signs knows its limits (...) This partial and varied empire is like the Japanese archipelago, made up of islets of meaning floating on that aspect of reality which remains forever senseless: the human face of nature, erupting in Man himself, and the inexorable violence of impermanence."

<sup>38</sup> "it is the dissolution of Loreley/a disseminating presence"

<sup>39</sup> "A mixture in which small solid or liquid particles are suspended in a liquid or gas." (Law and Rennie)

*Uchi-soto*, as a book, reprises this notion of suspension, which is central in *butō*. Meaning is suspended between the text, the photographs and the drawings, as each magnifies the others. The body of Akiko Senuma, lichenized on the cover of the book, is suspended between photograph and drawing, between human and lichen. If the lichen-drawing on the cover is a robe of earth, as we mentioned at the start, then the story it tells is one of interment. Not an interment which carves out a grave from the compactness of the earth in which to embed a body, but an interment understood as a mingling with the earth, a suspension of the undead body in the folds of a robe of earth, from which it can emerge and into which it can sink at the favour of our interpretations. *Uchi-soto* tells the story of the committal of a body to signs, and of signs to the body, in an endless return to life and death, creation and destruction, the canon and the avant-garde. As Butor writes "le rossignol improvise après le naufrage"<sup>40</sup>, borrowing from the imagery of the phoenix rising from its ashes, he tells us that creation and reconstruction can begin: "des paysages vus d'avion frissonnent dans la guérison"<sup>41</sup> (Butor "Externe-Intime").

The word *guérison*, or "healing", traditionally used in relation to bodily ailments, reminds us that our journey through the book was, in many ways, a bodily one. As a reader-viewer, we made our way through photographs and written descriptions of the body, but we also read through a literary body, a *corpus* comprising, amongst others, Dante and chroniclers of the Arthurian legend. This way of writing is not new for Michel Butor. For example, the five volumes which make up *Matière de rêves* "(...) sont composés en réseau grâce à un système de citations : il y a dans chaque rêve une citation qui provient des quatre autres."<sup>42</sup> (Butor *Matière de rêves* 432). Butor likes to cite and often does not acknowledge his source. As Spencer remarks:

(...) les textes de Butor, en mettant en cause le processus traditionnel de la citation, finissent par subvertir aussi la notion romantique de l'auteur (unique, grand, de génie, etc.), de l'influence comme processus voulu à sens unique, et donc de toute conception hiérarchique-chronologique de la littérature.<sup>43</sup> (Spencer 100).

This type of subversion is at play in *Uchi-soto*. In leaving his *corpus* authorless, Michel Butor "conçoi[t] l'écriture comme une mise en chantier permanente. Aucun livre n'est achevé, car l'écriture, pour [lui], ressortit à un processus à jamais *inachevable*."<sup>44</sup> (Ammour-Mayeur 113). No author means no end and no origin, just the flow of creation in which words are suspended. This suspension of words, in the chemical sense,

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<sup>40</sup> "the nightingale improvises after the wreck"

<sup>41</sup> "landscapes seen from planes shiver with healing"

<sup>42</sup> "are composed in networks thanks to a system of quotations: in every dream, there is a quote which is from the other four."

<sup>43</sup> "Butor's texts, because they question the traditional way of quoting, end up subverting the romantic notion of the author (unique, great, of genius, etc.), the notion of influence as a one-way process, and therefore the notion of any hierarchic-chronological conception of literature."

<sup>44</sup> "understands writing as constant reconstruction. No book is finished because writing, for him, is a process which is forever unfinishable."

constitutes a suspended, vaporised body, or a *corps sans organes* "(...) all the more alive and teeming once it has blown apart the organism and its organization." (Deleuze and Guattari 30) set in motion by citations.<sup>45</sup>

More than a dance, and more than moving one's body, *butō* is the body being moved. In other words, the translation is in the space of a *corpus*. This is precisely what is at play throughout *Matière de rêves* — in more ways than one. As Butor puts it, "[I]l y a de la danse dans l'écriture et beaucoup plus de travail manuel qu'on imagine ordinairement."<sup>46</sup> (Butor *Répertoire* V 17). All the texts Butor uses and sometimes reproduces are moved — *déménagés* to borrow from the title of a symposium organised around Michel Butor<sup>47</sup> — dissolved, atomised, and suspended throughout "Le Rêve des Lichens" in the form of quotations and re-writings.

Butor writes that: "Utiliser une citation, ce n'est pas seulement rendre hommage à un auteur qu'on aime : c'est éclairer notre propre naissance, le sous-sol de la maison que l'on construit."<sup>48</sup> (Butor *Curriculum vitae : entretiens avec André Clavel* 176). Citation is therefore for him an important *undertaking* underpinning his dwelling place and which is germane to play in its subterranean nature: "L'oncle Jules déclarait : 'Pas seulement l'éducation, mais aussi la récréation ; l'une ne va pas sans l'autre', et nous emmenait aux grands magasins de jeux sous les catacombes (à la fin des parties les plus folles, toujours une petite porte nous ramenait dans l'atelier)"<sup>49</sup> (Butor "Le rêve des lichens" 765).

What lies under the earth — and under the ossuary which represents death as a static, irreversible and mineral state — are, not one, but several play stores. In other words, reserves of playfulness to fuel creation when the time comes to go back up to the workshop through the little door. In an act of gardening, Michel Butor reaffirms the creative power of the (under)ground. The similarity between gardening and figurative forms of expression is also present in Japan. According to Gérard Macé: "L'histoire des jardins au Japon est donc intimement liée à l'histoire de la peinture, à laquelle elle emprunte ses principes essentiels, comme l'ossature du paysage ou la nécessité de plusieurs plans."<sup>50</sup> (Macé 29). Whereas in Japan painting influences gardening, gardening hybridises writing in "Le Rêve des Lichens": "L'oncle Jules qui ne venait nous voir qu'une fois tous les 80 jours (le reste du temps il faisait son tour du monde), et qui nous

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<sup>45</sup> As Jacques Derrida remarks, citation means: "(...) both 'setting in motion' (the frequentative form of 'to move' – *ciere*) and, also since it is a matter of shaking up a whole culture and history in its fundamental text, solicitation, i.e. the shakeup of a whole." (Derrida *Dissemination* 159)

<sup>46</sup> "there is dance in writing, and a lot more manual work than we usually think."

<sup>47</sup> "Michel Butor : Déménagements de la littérature" 19-21 October 2006, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris. <https://www.fabula.org/actualites/15399/michel-butor-demenagements-de-la-litterature.html>

<sup>48</sup> "To use a quotation not only means paying homage to an author one appreciates, but it also sheds light on one's own birth, on the foundations of the house one is building."

<sup>49</sup> "Uncle Jules declared: 'Not only education, but also recreation; one goes with the other,' and he would take us to the big toy shops under the catacombs (at the end of the wildest games, there was always a small door to take us back to the workshop)"

<sup>50</sup> "The history of gardens in Japan is therefore closely linked to the history of painting, from which it borrows its core principles, like the structure of the landscape or the necessity of having several planes"

rapportait un mot par pays, nous demandant de les planter entre les pages de nos livres [...]”<sup>51</sup> (Butor “Le rêve des lichens” 767). The intervention of Jules Verne, re-worked by Butor as a character in his dream, transforms words into seeds and books into soil, in preparation for another act of cross-pollination between literature and painting:

“L'oncle Jules qui entrouvrait nos livres quand il revenait, pour voir le progrès de nos plantations antérieures, merveilleux lichens illustrant les pages les plus arides (d'innombrables fils sortaient de la bibliothèque pour aller nourrir les tableaux), annonce [...]”<sup>52</sup> (Butor “Le rêve des lichens” 769).

Michel Butor, therefore, remains faithful to his belief that lichens constitute a sort of “peinture qui se fait toute seule.”<sup>53</sup> (Santschi 185). Unaided, the lichens of his dream grow to nurture the paintings, until, when the dream ends, they overgrow them and spread to the trees that surround the art gallery: “Et nous nous retrouvons rue du Dragon pour admirer l'*usnea barbata*<sup>54</sup> pendant aux branches des grands arbres.”<sup>55</sup> (Butor “Le rêve des lichens” 775). Lichens are thus established as intermedial and interconnecting devices, traversing many of Butor's texts and interacting with the unacknowledged texts of others and other art forms, such as *butō*. In doing so, Michel Butor's lichens enable an ongoing process of creation across the frontiers of media, genre, languages, and cultural areas.

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<sup>51</sup> “Uncle Jules who only came to see us once every 80 days (the rest of the time, he would travel around the world), and who brought us back one word for each country, asked us to plant them between the pages of our books”

<sup>52</sup> “Uncle Jules who half-opened out books when he came back to see the progress of our previous plantings, marvellous lichens illustrating the most arid pages (innumerable threads came out of the library to go feed the paintings), announces”

<sup>53</sup> “self-painting paint.”

<sup>54</sup> A species of lichen that grows on trees like tassels.

<sup>55</sup> “And we find ourselves on Dragon Street to admire the *usnea barbata* hanging from the branches of the tall trees.”

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