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# Dance Becomes Politics

Jan Fabre: 'I Am Blood'

Combatant Dance Division: Gekidan Kaitaisha

Breakthrough: All's New in Eurythmics



HOW THE JAPANESE ARE THROWING  
GLOBALISATION BACK IN OUR FACES

## Gekidan Kaitaisha,

CURRENTLY JAPAN'S MOST SIGNIFICANT  
DANCE GROUP, ARE TOURING EUROPE.  
KLAUS WITZELING SAW THE SPECTULAR  
START OF THE TOUR, OPENING THE  
"LAOKOON" FESTIVAL AT HAMBURG'S  
KAMPNAGELFABRIK

**The half-naked young woman stands there, rooted.** From time to time her right hand twitches. The muscles of her inner thigh shudder continuously. For minutes. It takes even longer until a photo comes to mind, the photo of a Vietnamese girl in shock, crying, running towards the camera. An image unforgettably burned into the memory. The impulse, quickly, at best immediately, to forget it. The Japanese company Gekidan Kaitaisha presents the European premiere of 'Bye Bye: The New Primitive' at the "Laocoon" summer festival at Hamburg's prestigious Kampnagelfabrik. And Kaitaisha reaches back mercilessly into memory and makes the audience once again a powerless witness of this crime of war.

Visitors to this body performance will be gripped several times by the emotions of helplessness. In the semi-darkness a horde of young men hound a woman. Their bodies collide full-speed in the clinches of rape. Later, another woman with a military helmet enters the scene: curved, gray as a rat, the body laid bare to the underpants, lifeless, even the mechanical repetition of unsheathing a knife for attack is nothing more than a soulless war machine. Her back holds up under the exactly 20 blows of her attacker. And each time the lips, instead of a scream, rip apart with the names of another conflict, another civil war, or the genocide of another ravaged country in Europe or the Third World.

The calmly and brutally executed act of violence on the stage creeps unpleasantly under the skin. It's not possible to zap away, like zapping away from the horror images in the evening news. Until the skin is ready to burst, a boy hammers ceaselessly, rhythmically with his palms onto his thighs; as if wanting to drum new sensations and life into his numb flesh and dead senses.

**These people are traumatized and paralyzed. The living dead.** Their limbs are mutilated, the bodies wounded, wrapped in bandages or supported by prosthetic devices. 'Bye Bye: The New Primitive' presents the body as a battlefield in tortuously slow and silent movement tableaux. And theatre as war. "Both make the body available and consumable," says director Shinjin Shimizu, and he demonstrates the effects in his "deconstructivist theatre." (This is the literal translation of *gekidan kaitaisha*.) We see the bodies steeled

for war — and the bodies which have survived it. The hell of war is acoustically and optically unshackled in a film sequence. Then once more the dead silence after the storm. Silent commands run across the screen: "**Paralyze your feelings — Censor your thoughts — Suppress your wishes — Pretend — Don't think — Create no security — Be infertile — Be hybrids — Be the new slaves ...**" All the premises for a new primitivism in the wake of wars and emotional decay in a media-networked and globally-steered Gulf War society.

Shimizu originally wanted to become an actor and dancer — "and both at the same time" — but he soon changed his plans and turned to directing. In 1985 he broke with theatre. He decided to make conventional theatre and dance impossible and began with mobile outdoor stagings at the Hinoemata Performance Festival. In the presentation series 'The Wandering Glance,' the audience walked with the actors through the fields, riverbeds, and parks. The audience experienced a "theatre of images" that used the body as medium and as object. Another creative turning point of Shimizu was marked by the media experience of the Gulf War, the genocide in Ruanda, aids, and the social-political changes in the wake of globalization and the internet revolution.

But it would be a misunderstanding to categorize Shimizu as a nihilistic pessimist who only sees and always expects the worst. He insists on remembering the past and the traces that politics and the media have left in the public consciousness; the suppressed problems and the invisible exercise of violence. "**The apparent homogeneity of Japanese society is a complete illusion,**" he says. And points to the social problems within Tokyo. The multicultural districts and immigrant ghettos are ruled by poverty and social tensions and are officially ignored or covered over with discrete silence. The current "romanticized realism on Japanese stages," says Shimizu, is a timid, reactionary, and a xenophobic hostile theatre behind the mask of democracy and pacifism. He provokes against it with his radical theatre of the body. He wishes to deconstruct its superficialities, penetrate through the protective armor of the skin, and then to expose the inscribing of individual and social history in character-like calligraphies of the body. The skin is an important issue in his theatre of the body. The blows of the ▶

Gekidan Kaitaisha's 'Bye Bye: The New Primitive' shows a forlorn island on which mischievous capital flows are being observed mistrustfully. Doom seems imminent.

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Gekidan Kaitaisha means "Theatre of Deconstruction." Founded in 1995 by Shinjin Shimizu in Tokyo, the company's notoriety grew rapidly, making it the scandal of the year just one year later. There were reports of brutal beatings and spilled blood and members of the audience storming the stage to release the dancers from their seemingly murderous torture. At the time Shinjin Shimizu described his method as Antonin Artaud's "Theatre of Cruelty" seen through the eyes of Godfather of Deconstructivism Jacques Derrida. The piece 'Tokyo Ghetto' appeared in eleven different versions. 'Zero Category' (see *ballet-tanz 10/98*) and 'De-Control' (see *ballet-tanz yearbook 1999*) dealt with Europe and the fall of the Berlin wall but did not appear outside of Japan. Gekidan Kaitaisha came to Europe again with their criticism of American free-trade policy entitled 'Bye-Bye: The New Primitive.' Shimizu's style is often described as "unbearable" and "confusing." This is not justified as he distinctly parades historical and cultural influences on the dancers' bodies — albeit as uncompromisingly as you would expect of an artist.

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► performer who tries to soften the thin line of skin between the inside and the outside of the body are something "I wouldn't like to call a method. Because every member of the ensemble has their own neurosystem. Some were dancers or actors, they all have different trainings and physical constitutions. In order to activate all these, I try to find an appropriate way for each individual." His current experimental laboratory is the "phantom body." "It is a fantasy. The movement of an amputated leg, or the sensations of the limbless living body would become visible again in our system of the senses. I would like to determine precisely what these things are in a body system and then to work with them."

Shimizu characterizes the rehearsal process as seemingly chaotic. "I experiment with various information, suggest an element, a tone, or a theme, hammer in a few pegs until they form a row or a sequence, and then accelerate the exploration process to movement. That's how I come from one form to the next."

His artistic development has been inspired by the Butoh Pope Tatsumi Hijikata, who Shimizu believes has been generally misunderstood, the contraction techniques of Martha Graham that he transforms into Kaitaisha style, and the Tanztheater of Pina Bausch. "She made me aware of gender questions and problems in male-female relationships. But I wouldn't say that I've been influenced by her. We have to know the artists around us and understand how they understand and use the body according to modern terms. A knowledge of history is indispensable for me — the history of dance and theatre too."

The perception of the body in Japanese theatre has changed several times in the last half of the 20th century. In the 60's the presence of the body on the stage was taken up and presented. Twenty years later the visible signals of physical existence were frowned upon. "The body wanted to disappear on the stage, even though it still stood there," explains theatre critic Hidenaga Otori, the future director of the Laokoon Festival.

Shimizu began his experiment Gekidan Kaitaisha here by first excluding all naturalistic movements. "An artist who tries to find reality loses reality and just imitates illusions," he believes. Actors and bodies became objects — similar to the gigantic three-dimensional tableaux of Yuchiki Matsumoto. Matsumoto, a set designer from Osaka, also wanted to reform theatre when he founded his group Ishinha (renewal) in 1985. He came from the fine arts, and was influenced by the actionism of the Gutai Group in the Kansai region. He too began with a spectacularly arranged musical outdoor image theatre. The Ishinha collective had about 50 members and toured to locations like shut-down railroad or dock facilities. They built accommodations from wood, used large planks and poles to construct gigantic stage installations and then the sets and staging. Matsumoto occupied himself, similar to Shimizu, with the collective and personal memories, with the history and cosmos of large urban centers and the very specific Japanese concept of individuality. Matsumoto's actors also seem faceless, uniformly dressed, functioning in synchronized motion like mechanized objects. They were color and brush strokes from the palette of a painter of portraits of universal worlds.

**Shimizu's war machines, on the other hand, reveal the extinguished faces of humans steeled for combat.** The actors embody — and don't act, in the sense of representing something — the expression of humanity stripped of all dignity. They are the wrappings of defunctionalized and misused bodies that have lost all useful value. In contrast to Matsumoto, Shimizu goes a step further in his "Theatre of Images," to breathing, bleeding and sweating flesh. And he doesn't remain at their more or less beautiful surfaces, but attempts to pull the body inside out, to brutally expose its estrangement and deformation. "In order to be able to criticize, I create a functional disorder within the existing structures, theatrical as well as performance — I cause an inner collapse."



In 'Bye-Bye: The New Primitive' a man stands in front of a mirror, the mirror that Shin-ji Shimizu also holds towards us. Smugly, the actor spells out the achievements of western culture from alpha to omega, starts wars in passing, and strikes out without feeling, then very slowly pulls on his coat, very slowly packs his suitcase, leaves, comes slowly back jovial and well, takes off his clothes, and, in all soulful satisfaction and tranquility, as if the wars and struggles for survival that are playing on the stage haven't the slightest thing to do with him, and remains in calmness, as if nothing has happened.

An almost inconspicuous mocking figure at the edge of the edge, like a capitalistic marionette player pulling the strings of power, a cynic, an artist at concealing the misuse of political power. But he is also like a sad marionette himself, jiggling on the threads of the

hubris of the self-overestimation of western culture. Jean Baudrillard described this in an essay entitled 'L'autre, ailleurs' from 'Figures de l'altérité,' 1992: In contrast to our own society, Japanese society, as well as some others, "are not afflicted by the virus of 'origin' or 'authenticity.'" "We proceed from the principle that our culture has been created by us ourselves, out of our own being and essence, without any alien influences from without. **"A fundamental misconception, upon which we suffer." The conviction that everything comes from ourselves alone damns us to "assume the responsibility for everything that takes place. Our misery subsists therein, that is our wretched destiny, and that of the western world."** Gekidan Kaitaisha quietly sticks its crooked, spastically twitching finger into this open wound. ◀

'Bye-Bye: The New Primitive' on tour:

4-6 Oct, New York;  
10-11 Oct, Cardiff;  
18-19 Oct, Manchester;  
23-24 Oct, Brighton;  
31 Oct to 3 Nov, London

