Itô Mika: The Imaginal Moulting of the Striptease

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Itô Mika: The Imaginal Moulting of the Striptease

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Bruno Fernandes is a freelance researcher acclaimed for his interesting works about 20th century Japanese counter-cultures. As such, he was one of the seven 2015 recipients of the grant awarded annually by the National Centre for Plastic Arts (CNAP) for research in art theory and criticism. In partnership with the CNAP, the journal *Critique d'art* offers one of these recipients a chance to present his or her work by publishing an article in these columns. This will heighten the recipient's visibility while at the same time helping to provide publicity for policies supporting art theory and criticism in France. The following thus enjoyed this assistance from the CNAP in 2015: Erik Bulloet, who works around film and his double, where ventriloquy, chit-chat and performance all meet; Emma Dusong, who is interested in the links between song and contemporary art in the American scene; Meriam Korichi, who is involved with philosophy after art; Cédric Vincent, who is exploring the archives of the First World Festival of Black Arts; Judith Ickowicz, who is editing an anthology of legal writings dealing with the history and theory of design—a continuation of her comprehensive works on the law after the dematerialization of the artwork; and Remi Parcollet, who is undertaking extensive research into the authors of exhibition views in Europe and the United States from 1960 to 2000 (cf. *Critique d'art*, n° 46).

Bruno Fernandes, for his part, has set his heart on studying, somewhere between the mercantile domain and the (im)pulsive domain, the use and territoriality values of the spectacularized nude in Japan during the period of late Shôwa growth (1945-1989). In this way, Bruno Fernandes is extending his work on the transgressive activist Japanese group

of the 1960s, Zero Jigen, which was published in 2013 by Les Presses du réel. Here, he outlines the writing of a history of striptease and its erotology in modern Japan. Alexis Vaillant

Itô Mika and the *butôka* Ishii Mitsutaka, *Dokkiri zen.ei buyô*: Itô Mika « *Oo-jô no monogatari* » [Shocking avant-garde dance, *Histoire de Mlle Ô* by the Bizarre Ballet run by Itô Mika]. Scene taken from *Oo-jô no monogatari* [Histoire d'O] © d.r.

Itô Mika in a Surrealist costume of a chained night bird. Under the heading "City Arts Festival" (*Machi no geijutsusai, modan-aoto guruupu no netsuenburi*). Scene taken from *Oo-jô no monogatari* [Histoire d'O] © d.r.

- 1 In the 1960s, and in an exemplary manner, the figure of the dancer Itô Mika (1936-1970) encompassed aesthetic elements drawn from the avant-garde dances of her day, and from

popular shows of nudes—sometimes grouped together under the term striptease. Her art culminated in a hybrid form which helps us to grasp the creative potential and the moral, not to say political challenges of the spectacularized nude in a booming Japan.

2 Fragments of a history of striptease in Japan

- 3 The appearance of striptease in Japan is often given the date of 1 January 1947. What was involved was a *gakubuchi-shoo* (frame-show), which was not so much a strip as a *tableau vivant* (living picture), in which a female model, bare-breasted and motionless, was presented as the *décor* for a music-hall act in the Teitô-za, a Tokyo theatre. Those early shows made reference to western art— Sandro Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, and Peter Paul Rubens's *Andromeda*—included, without any solution of continuity, in a “tradition of modernity”, resulting from the Meiji (1868-1912) and Taishô (1912-1926) periods, legitimized by way of foreign works.
- 4 The “classic” striptease developed fast once the ban on movement imposed by the censorship of the day (controlled by the SCAP,¹ from 1945 to 1952) was lifted. As a factor in a display introduced into the occupying GI package, along with chewing gum, nylons, pin-up girls and the new constitution, that striptease was part and parcel of the ideological outfit of a democratic software forcefully introduced into the nuclear chink of a Japan destroyed by fifteen years of wars.² But it did not introduce a “discovery” of modern eroticism in Japan. Western erotic esthesia—capacity for sensation—, disseminated in the frenzied atmosphere of Meiji via painting (*yôga*) and photography, had found a line in the cosmopolitanism of Taishô with western models popularized by press and films. The *moga* (modern girls) and the *rebyuu* (music halls) of the between-the-wars years already displayed an eroticized female body, well removed from the full and puerile forms³ of the *ukiyo-e* and the *shunga* of Edo. The libidinal semiocracies of the nations dominating erotic spectacularization—France, England, Germany, and the United States—were digested. The work of the pictorialist photographer Nojima Yasuzô (1889-1964) clearly reflect the moment when the between-the-wars Japanese body underwent an erotic change, at least in terms of the gaze cast upon it. Even in the austerity of 1940s' fascism, music-hall shows like the *Takarazuka*⁴ continued to attract crowds.
- 5 The postwar period was just a resumption of activity, a return of licentiousness in the overheated atmosphere of a social shift forced upon Japan by the occupying Americans, whose prime concern was to do with a re-casting not only of the internecine mechanics of the State (economic reshaping, political purges, new constitution), but also of the self-image and, consequently, of the affectology of the Japanese as a whole. It was under this aegis that the landscape of Japan in ruins was read—the cemetery of a still lukewarm world and manure of a new capitalism which would spread across Asia and the world in the following decades.
- 6 Among the mottos of accelerated Americanization, occurring between 1945 and 1952, a threefold slogan circulated: 3R-5D-3S/ to wit, 3R: Revenge, Reform, Revive / 5D: Disarmament, Demilitarization, Decentralization, Democracy, Deindustrialization/ 3S: Sports, Sex, Screen.
- 7 Here, 3S defined a new spectacularization of the nude, in which the striptease was a very popular form. It is an interesting formula, advocating something sexual that was, at the time, the target of busy moralizing campaigns launched by the SCAP, joined by conservative feminists, singling out venereal dangers and debauchery, “naturally”

associated with communism during the Cold War. In the guise of democratization, an interplay between patent (morality) and latent (licentiousness) marked the hegemony of the United States, moralizing the public place (respectable body) and dictating the erotic reactivity (liberal eroticism) of the new citizen (*shimin*). But the realities of the black market and new forms of prostitution, unofficial laboratories of Japanese neo-liberalism, always sidelined the same social classes, including poor women supplying the bulk of the *panpan* girls⁵ or strippers, those second-class citizens, and pariahs. An accursed part of the “Japanese miracle” casting a shadow over the optimism of the American ‘*reconquista*’, but fertile ideological loam for the edification of the super-growth in the offing.

8 ***Nikutai vs. Kokutai***

- 9 A 1950s’ leitmotiv underscored Japan’s ideological switch, during which the sacred theme of the imperialist period—the *kokutai* (body of the nation)—was replaced by the *nikutai* (carnal body). This latter took the form of a declaration issued by Tamura Taijirô (1911-1983), which was popularized by his writings adapted to film, including the famous *Nikutai no mon* [*Gate of Flesh*, 1947], made in 1948 by Makino Masahiro (1908-1993), then again in 1964 in a more violent version directed by Suzuki Seijun (1923-). Otherwise put, the sacrificial patriotic glorification, which had intoxicated Japan and led it to disaster, was suddenly replaced by a frenzied hedonism—another diktat glorifying the sexual body and pleasures—intended to offset the fascist puritanism which, until 1945, bedecked public places with slogans like *Zeitaku wa teki da!* [Luxury is the enemy!] and *Paamanento o yamemashô!* [Stop perms!]. Tamura’s ironical vision was nevertheless based on the realities of the unleashing of thousands of *kasutori zasshi* [cheap, racy magazines] upon a greedy readership, and of the boom in prostitution in the face of the ‘sexual urges’ of the occupying army rabble (350,000 GIs were based in Japan in 1945). The change in Japan’s female eros was an *utensil* of democratization and the economic liberalism which was meant to be synonymous with it. Eroticization of capitalism and capitalization of eroticism, as in western Europe, either occupied or assisted by the United States as part of the Marshall Plan, but where the metabolic gap was less. Race, sex and class converged in that shift from a small, non-angular Asian body to the aggressive and slender body of the pin-up, whose model was European and white. There the much-maligned strip retained a whiff of the fairground booth and vulgarity which likened it to moral subversion, and even assimilated it with opposition during the Cold War. That counter-cultural status won over postwar Japanese artists. Let us just offer one emblematic example of the link between striptease and 1960s’ avant-gardes, that of the dancer Itô Mika, with a mention, too, in passing, of the choreographer Hijikata Tatsumi (1928-1986), that genius of the enigmatic *ankoku butô*.

10 ***Itô Mika and the Bizaaru Baree Guruupu***

- 11 Itô Mika (Kawashima Kimiko) is a forgotten figure of avant-garde Japanese dance of the 1960s. With her Bizarro Baree Guruupu⁶—combining striptease and sado-masochistic show—Itô Mika hijacked the representations and myths of modern sexuality. A contemporary of Hijikata Tatsumi, her style verged on the *butô* with its strangeness and power, but veered away from it by an absence of reference to any kind of Japaneseness. She created a non-genre, challenging “great art” in dance. Her provocative aesthetics revealed a taboo swathe of modern Japan’s urban counter-culture associated with the *eroguro*.⁷
- 12 Major artists like the illustrator Uno Akira (1934-), the composer Ichiyanagi Toshi (1933-) and the painter Kaneko Kuniyoshi (1936-2015) worked with her. Itô Mika, who was a

physical education teacher in civilian life (like the *butôka* Ôno Kazuo), had studied classical dance and been trained at the Dance Study Centre run by Kuni Chiya (1911-2011), an avant-garde choreographer black-balled for her leftist views. Itô Mika also worked with Ishii Mitsutaka and Maro Akaji, Hijikata Tatsumi's first *butôka*, and was close to the underground happening movements then developing in Japan.

- 13 Itô Mika's aggressive and androgynous beauty, and her decision to work in disparaged places—nightclubs and cabarets—singled her out in the dance world. Remaining on the sidelines, and pigeonholed in the *Angura*—the underground which included Terayama Shûji and Kara Jûrô—, Itô Mika was regarded as an artistic stripper, like Rita Renoir in France. She died at the age of 34 from carbon monoxide intoxication while she was taking a bath, and the archives covering her life and work are few and far between.⁸

14 **Hijikata and the strip**

- 15 Itô Mika did not join his troupe, but in 1961 she was part of Hijikata Tasumi's circle, taking part with him in Fujii Kunihiro's *Niguro to kawa*, and then the 1963 happening *Sweet Sixteen*. Hijikata Tatsumi used the striptease as training for his dancers, to rid them of their inhibitions and also pay for his *butô*. He choreographed cabaret shows and even, in 1964, a review at the Nichigeki, Tokyo's large music-hall. In 1971, he offered pieces to the Shinjuku Art Village of Kabuki-chô, where there were *fûzoku-ten* (kinds of brothels) and strip clubs. Pavement advertising, photographs and slogans suggested a racy spectacle, as would be expected in such a venue. His *ankoku butô* pieces, with white-powdered naked girls, veered towards an Expressionist nude show capable of seducing ordinary guys. This art production testing an unprepared eye, outside the circle of the initiated, hallmarked Hijikata Tatsumi's approach. In 1969, he put on shows at the Space Capsule, the discotheque where Itô Mika performed. In 1967, his dancers, Ishii Mitsutaka and Maro Akaji, took part in the adaptation by the Bizaaru Baree Guruupu of Pauline Réage's *Histoire d'O*.⁹

16 **Space Capsule**

- 17 This futuristic discotheque, which opened in 1968 in Akasaka, lined with polished steel and spots, conjuring up a lunar module, was designed by the architect Kurokawa Kishô (1933-), a member of the *Metabolism* group. Fashion and avant-garde shows were held in it beneath stroboscopic lighting. At them, you might bump into the artists Terayama Shûji, Kara Jûrô, Hijikata Tatsumi, and Okamoto Tarô, writers like Mishima Yukio, the poet Yoshioka Minoru, and others.
- 18 In it, Itô Mika put on dances of erotic works like Kurita Isamu's *Aido* and Sade's *Justine*. The kitsch signature and the provocative themes were akin to the floor shows of the day, but Itô Mika challenged and unravelled the metabolic data of the Japanese woman. She retained the heretical part of the *butô* of Hijikata Tatsumi's masculine period—"anal", according to this latter—from *Kinjiki* (1959) to *Nikutai no haran* (1968). He then focused on the feminine aspect with the *Hakutôbô* troupe, where Itô Mika might have been a "muse", like Ashikawa Yôko and Kobayashi Saga.
- 19 The power behind the Bizaaru Baree Guruupu was the tormented female figure of Itô Mika, both predator and victim—somewhere between Sacher-Masoch's *Wanda* and *Justine*—giving birth to a utopian, at times morbid body, in the metallic shimmer of the Space Capsule. Imaginal moulting of an unknown creature, metabolism of a fantasy woman who, like the violent butterfly, was an ephemeral heresy at the heart of the norm-bound modernity of a Japan in the thick of capitalist euphoria. Itô Mika here joins the impious

silhouettes of Hijikata Tatsumi's *butô*—he who said that the body was the most alien thing in the world.

20 **Biographical notes:**

- 21 1958 : Itô Mika studied with Kuni Chiya and Kuni Masami
- 22 1960 : *Dance action-2* with Matsumae Minako, Kawana Noboru and others / *Kawaita zô* by Kuni Chiya.
- 23 1961 : *Kiirô jikan* by Kuni Masami / *Niguro to kawa* by Fujii Kunihiko
- 24 1963 : *Performing Festival Sweet Sixteen*, happening at the Sôgetsu Hall, Tokyo
- 25 1965 : Duo with Aozu Yoshiko for *Karubadosu no kai*, a literary group to which Tamura Taijirô belonged
- 26 1967 : Itô Mika put on a stage version of *Histoire d'O* by Pauline Réage
- 27 1968 : Itô Mika adapted *Aido no keifu* by Kurita Isamu / *Bokushin no gogo, Rashômon de* Wakamatsu Miki and Tsuda Ikuko
- 28 1969 : Show window by Saotome Yukio, at the Tokyo art museum/ *Shizuka na umi no kyôhu* at the Space Capsule, visited by Hijikata Tatsumi
- 29 1970 : Itô Mika put on *Yuki Onna* / Accidental death of Itô Mika by asphyxiation while taking a bath.
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NOTES

1. Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers headed by MacArthur.
 2. From the early 1930s, Japan was in a state of emergency and engaged in a policy of military aggression in Asia.
 3. Shibusawa Tatsuhiko (1928-1987) defined Japanese female beauty as “childlike” as opposed to the “adult” beauty of Westerners.
 4. An operetta theatre, founded in 1913, performed solely by femaler troupes.
 5. Prostitutes in western dress.
 6. Inspired by *Bizaaru no kai* [Bizarre Company], founded by the homosexual draughtsman Tomita Eizô (1906-1982). Itô Mika met him in 1969 during a screening of Jess Franco's *Justine*, based on the Marquis de Sade.
 7. A weird and racy genre of the Taishô –close to the Grand-Guignol– which had echoes in B movies.
 8. Her husband, Itô Bungaku (1934-), published her biography: *Hadaka no nyôbô, rokujûnendai o shippû no gotoku kakenuketa zen.ei buyôka Itô Mika*, Tokyo : Sairyûsha, 2010.
 9. Translated by Shibusawa Tatsuhiko.
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