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Dance and Video Review

Jonas Mekas, Virginie Marchand and Kazuo Ohno

Yukihiko Yoshida met Virginie Marchand and the filmmaker Jonas Mekas at the club SuperDeluxe in Roppongi, Tokyo, Japan, on 24 October 2006, at a viewing of Virginie Marchand's Video Installation and Dance Performance in Tribute to Kazuo Ohno, filmed by Jonas Mekas and Zoltan Hauville.

Kazuo Ohno (1906–2010) was a legendary dancer who created Butoh, a form of Japanese dance theater, with Tatsumi Hijikata. His most famous works include “La Argentina”, “My Mother”, “Dead Sea”, and “Water Lilies”. His continuing vigor even as he grew older was astonishing. When Ohno was aged between 99 and 101, Virginie Marchand visited the Kazuo Ohno Butoh Institute six times to dance with him. Marchand, an up-and-coming poet and filmmaker, danced and sometimes also recorded the dances with Ohno. She seeks to depict in a very personal way the layers of the human spirit in different parts of the world. Her works use a language without rules; she is not a follower of other artists or of history. She has screened some of her movies at the Anthology Film Archives in New York City, a non-profit organization that aims to preserve, store, and screen experimental films, and in a number of art galleries, and she shows extracts from them on Instagram and YouTube. Her reading of the avant-garde writer and director Antonin Artaud influences her work, which includes *BROOKLYN SALVADOR* (FR/US/SV 2011), *ECUADOR DECEMBER* (2014), *EPILEPTIC OPERA BUTOH* (2022), and *FOUR ROADS TO THE LIGHT KAZUO OHNO TRILOGY* (2020).

Marchand grew up in Japan and moved to France at the age of six. There she stopped speaking Japanese and started dancing. A friend who was a cameraman and had worked in Japan later told Marchand her dance looked like Butoh, although she knew nothing of the dance form at the time. She learned about Butoh, and Kazuo Ohno, later, through Mekas, and felt a desire to study the style.

Fig. 1: Virginie Marchand dancing with a tree, Brooklyn, Jonas Mekas's house. Image from OPERA EPILEPTIC BUTOH, 2022. © Virginie Marchand



Marchand met Mekas in Paris in 2004. They shared a passion for film, poetry, and nature. An immigrant poet, Mekas made full use of the non-verbal expression of video. Marchand has in turn used poetry in creating her videos. Mekas, who started to film with a Bolex camera to show the energy in the trees, told her that trees represented the symbolic roots he lacked, and she felt the same way. Marchand gave to Mekas half of a piece of tree bark that she always carried with her. Mekas and Marchand would later make a video in which she dances with the trees in a park in the hours from before sunrise to noon.

Marchand had been instructed in video at the National School of Fine Arts in Paris before she met Mekas. Working with Mekas, living movie history himself, built naturally on what she had learned. They were business partners until 2008, living in the same house in Brooklyn for a few years (fig. 1). They kept in contact to screen the projects they had made together, and Mekas continued to advise Marchand on her film projects until the final years of his life.

Their collaboration was introduced in Japan in the February 2006 Japanese issue of *Esquire* magazine, in a special feature entitled “Quality of Romance Movies”. It was also portrayed in magazines in the United States and Canada. Mekas’s video journal *365 DAYS PROJECT* (2007) includes Marchand for 5 August.

Mekas had deep insight into movies, literature, and art. As a resident of New York, he experienced an era of rich dance culture in that city. Fred Astaire, known for musical masterpieces such as *TOP HAT* (Mark Sandrich, US 1935), danced with him. In the documentary film *IMAGINE* (US 1972) by

John Lennon and Yoko Ono, Mekas appears in a scene with Astaire, Ono, Lennon, and George Harrison. Drawing on his theater experience as a young man, Mekas did not rehearse. In *A Dance with Fred Astaire* (2017), he recalled with humor that this was his first, last, and best performance in his career as a dancer.

Mekas loved New York artists, who were a source of his poetic footage. As others have pointed out, Mekas read *Walden; or Life in the Woods* (1854) by the American poet Henry David Thoreau from a young age. A new momentum arose with the sound of revolution and independence sung by Lithuania and the Baltic States in 1990. *Letters from Nowhere* (1994/95) contains a theory of civilization by Mekas, who was born the child of a peasant. He wrote of the world as a large farm and of living in earth and nature; he valued not only new thoughts but also ancient wisdom. In addition to his love for nature, trees, and peasants, Mekas often said that he trusted in his “angels” and encouraged everyone to trust in their own angels in turn.

Mekas, Marchand, and cinematographer Zoltan Hauville shot the footage of Marchand dancing with Ohno, who was confined to a wheelchair in his last years. They had been invited to Ohno’s 99th and 100th birthday celebrations. Ohno, who had Alzheimer’s disease, struggled to communicate with those around him. However, the video records that when Marchand faced the artist and moved to lead, Ohno sometimes reacted by moving his hands in a clearly intentional manner. Marchand has stated that she was surprised and moved by Ohno’s reaction. When she lacked focus, Ohno stopped the dance until she found it again. Marchand felt the light beyond Ohno’s expression and existence.

Kazuo Ohno Butoh Institute members thought that Mekas, his reputation already secure, could not be considered avant-garde. But Mekas responded by noting that the avant-garde is always criticised. The video of Ohno was made without worrying about what it might represent; Mekas simply asked the Kazuo Ohno Butoh Institute to watch the video when it was released. When the movie came out, the conservative institute was concerned, for as Butoh had spread in Japan and become internationally recognized, the definition of the dance form had become rigid. But the dance form was created more than 50 years ago, and there is space today for reconsideration and innovation.

In the dance scenes where Marchand actively interacts with Ohno, their movements form a continuous flow (figs. 2 and 3). Mekas wrote of the dance between Marchand and Ohno as a dialogue about love and of the movie itself as a song sung by one poet to another poet. The film director Martin Scorsese

Fig. 2: Virginie Marchand dances with Kazuo Ohno, 2008. © Virginie Marchand



Fig. 3: Kazuo Ohno and Virginie Marchand with claw, 2008. © Virginie Marchand



wrote to Marchand praising the film and its editing. Even though the event now lies somewhat in the past, many dancers and those connected to video-making and video-showing still wish to use Marchand's footage or ask her to perform.

Footage of Butoh has been around for a long time. The work of filmmaker Takahiko Imura (1937–2022), a friend of Mezas, is known to the Japanese, but overseas film directors also recorded Butoh, for example in *THE WRITTEN FACE* (Daniel Schmid, CH/JP 1995). Well-known filmings include those of Peter Sempel, who worked with Kazuo Ohno and produced not only documentary footage of Butoh but also depictions of Mezas. Koshiro Otsu also recorded Ohno. Otsu teamed up with Shinsuke Ogawa and Noriaki Tsuchimoto and is very well acquainted with documentary history. He noted the importance

of location in *THE SCENE OF THE SOUL* (Katsumi Hirano, JP 1991). He directed *KAZUO OHNO BUTOH DANCER* (JP 2007), which was shot not on film but on video, and edited the dance without scissors. Donald Richie, director of works such as *GISEI (HUMAN SACRIFICE)*, (JP 1959), who filmed the performing arts of that era, including artists such as Tatsumi Hijikata, stated that in the film *Butoh* is a pure dance.

When the movie of Marchand was screened at the Anthology Film Archives, Mekas wrote on Facebook: “I urge you not to miss this film because Kazuo Ohno was one of the great dancers of the XXth Century. Even at 99 and 101, against everything that seems to go against it, he dances. He dances as a manifesto, as a testimonial that art, via *Butoh* dance, has a dominion over the old age.”¹

The movie shot by Mekas, Hauville and Marchand, and directed by Marchand, is similar to Jonas Mekas’s vision in his personal work, but it was shot using more modern equipment than the Bolex camera. Marchand’s editing is dynamic, portraying a dismantled dance work that is reminiscent of Artaud and of the external gaze. The senses of both performers are perfectly synchronized. This progressive work has a profound message based on the distinctive personality of Kazuo Ohno in the footage.

The focus on the thrill of dancing and on the great existence of Kazuo Ohno in his final years draws a line between the person taking the picture and its subject. However, in Marchand’s work, the focus is not always on the beautiful aspects of her subject. In addition, it does not create a strong distinction between photographer and subject. The distance between them is close to zero, so to speak, for the photographer is integrated with the subject. This feature is also found in the work of Mekas and Imura, who photographed *Butoh* even as they participated, using hand-held video cameras. Marchand films as she dances, her eyes closed, for she believes that the authenticity needed to dance *Butoh* will drive her hand and provide perfect footage without her needing to watch through the camera lens.

Although it is a three-part movie, each part can be understood as a cohesive work. It begins with a video of Kazuo Ohno at the age of 99, shot in 2005 during his birthday celebration and in the days afterwards. Ohno is on a chair or in a bed, and Marchand dances with him. She has stated that she felt a strong light from the great dancer. Ohno bears a simple and expansive expression. Seeing the great artist celebrate his birthday with his

1 Jonas Mekas, Facebook post, 25 October 2014.

son, Yoshito Ohno, who dances with roses, is beautiful and moving. Eventually the scenery is of India. Marchand travels and films the vast land while remembering the recent memory of Ohno. People from this country also appear, along with the claw of a Himalayan bear. Back in Japan, she dances with the claw and with Kazuo Ohno, who has reached the age of 100. A bear is part of the dance of Kazuo Ohno, a performer of Butoh from Hokkaido, but Marchand appears to have found the bear in her own work process. The film culminates in her performance in New York.

Alongside works such as *REMINISCENCES OF A JOURNEY TO LITHUANIA* (Jonas Mekas, UK/DE 1972), Mekas has used textual messages and mysterious sounds, often in video diaries, to launch new meanings that go beyond the immediate content of the video. He has used this video-diary style to produce works about Fluxus members, for example, or about New York theater or dancers. In this work, however, the live feeling of the location is strongly emphasized.

Ohno taught at Kanto Gakuin University and Soshin Jogakuin. He was influenced by the Christian teacher Yu Sakata and was baptized as a Christian himself. Many of his works, such as “The Dead Sea”, are evidently influenced by Christianity. Marchand has stated that the light from Ohno that is seen in this video can be thought of as the light of God. Jonas Mekas said that when he passed away he would simply return to the Light. That Light can also be thought of as God. In the video, in his last years Kazuo Ohno dances toward the Light and at the same time shows his own brilliance before returning to the Light.

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