

Roko Kawai: an artist's workbook

BELONGING AND SOLO 07

IZU HOUSE 08

TOKYO JOURNAL 05

TRAVEL JOURNAL 05

BIOGRAPHY

Bimyoh / JA 1

4.05.05

K writes: part of being JA, i think, is to be neurotic cuz you can't tell when you can break the rules and when you absolutely shouldn't. a normal jpn person at least knows.

10.6.05

said good-bye to the ihouse folk. we chatted a little about my "bi-myo-na" position throughout my fellowship. the ryokan coupons notwithstanding, they said any other "gaijin" fellow would not have to consider any of what i did.

bimyona: very interesting word—unusual, sensitive, hard to define, interesting, weird.

positive sense: bimyo-na coloring (interesting color combo in painting, fashion), taste palette (unusual spices—cooking), movement (inventive, odd combination). rhythm (surprising, grabs you, as in jazz)

negative: uncertain, hard to define, vague (like my position here)

i asked if "hard to define" were necessarily negative—in the U.S. one might think it's "culturally interesting." they said in Japan it's too "weird" to even be given the effort of "interesting." ????

in the vernac, young people use it "out of context"—saying a relationship is bimyo—that they don't know if they're in relationship or not yet, intimate or not...



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Friend and professional colleague that I first met through the UCLA Center for Intercultural Performance program called Asia Pacific Performance Exchange. In 2005, she and I corresponded regularly – as gal pals, as fellow Japanese Americans albeit with differing family histories, as contemporary performance colleagues and cultural researchers.

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International House of Tokyo, the Japan offices of the Japan-U.S. Friendship Commission program. The U.S. offices are housed at the National Endowment for the Arts.

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ryokan
Traditional style Japanese inn, many of which can be highly expensive.

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gaijin
Vernacular for gaikokujin, or foreigner. In my generation, it usually referred to a Caucasian foreigner.

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Bimyoh / JA 2



6.23.05 @ 11:15:16 PM

K writes: As for the landlady, I understand your paranoia about the preference for "real" foreigners; I think I experienced some version of that when I was in Tokyo in 2001.

3.21.05

my landlady is very formal and polite. i can't quite place her; and i can't quite place where she's placing me. it's still so weird that we speak in english 100% of the time! language as a weapon. i feel undeservingly "powerful." i want to put myself below her, to be the one to have to struggle with the second language. yet i've been warned and instructed. only speak in english for a while.

the i-house folks gave me the email contact for Sawako, a past JUFSC fellow who is like me—japanese looking, speaking,... a writer and poet. she's actually here still living in tokyo. we will eventually meet and VENT! in a short exchange, she said—keep speaking english. but quickly followed with: in the end, it doesn't really work anyway. if you look japanese with a japanese name, eventually you will get sucked into the vortex of complex social expectations. but it can't hurt to hold onto your "foreign-ness" as long as possible.

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Background image: Darth Vader and school girl Lolitas, billboard in Tokyo subway. July 2005.

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Sawako

A past JUSFC fellow, still living on and off in Japan, a poet. [View website](#)

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Bimyoh / JA 3



3.19.05 : SAWAKO (IT DOESN'T REALLY WORK ANYWAY)

...I agree with the ihouse folks about establishing your 'foreign-ness', but it kind of doesn't work...if you look japanese and speak japanese. It's really hard for people to reconfigure that, but on the other hand there are plenty of Japanese people who have been out and about and seen enough of the world that they can understand better where you're coming from. My big mistake was trying too hard to do the correct 'japanese' thing, just because I could. (once I get started on this, it will get long...will try to write again later.)

8.16.08

K [coming back from [Fulbright](#)]: how hard it is not to get sucked into the whole Japanese (American) mind-f*ck...or rather, how hard it is to extract yourself from it, because it seems there's no avoiding it. But for me, sometime around January I feel like I found a good balance – between my desires to fit in/pass/get it “right” and to be comfortable accepting gaijin indulgence and/or judgment.

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Background image: Tsukiji Fish Market, Tokyo. May 2005.

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Fulbright

Fulbright Fellowship. She spent 9 months in Tokyo from Sept 2007 to July 2008, during which time we corresponded again.

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Bimyoh / JA 4

4.30.05

Hey Chris: now deeply engrossed in the "[Meiji](#)" book (which i tried to weigh on my scale—no dice, though i feels like 10 lbs!). what happened between 1850 and 1912, the beginning of all that imperialist aggression? before Meiji, the emperor had no power at all. during Meiji, his symbol rose to the status that Amelie was talking about. but not because of a single man... there were many many complex currents going on—not the least of which was Japan's witnessing of Britain defeating China in the Opium Wars and the Dutch/Spanish/French subjugation of Indonesia, Philippines & Vietnam respectively. Americans and Russians especially were banging at (down) Japan's door. all of which is so interesting to me—[Mitsumen Komori](#) was created in 1829. in 40 years, most of Japan would change completely to European dress.



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Bimyoh / JA 4



Mitsumen Komori

Originally created for Segawa Kikunojo V by Tsuchi Jihei, with music by Namizaki Tokuji in the tokiwazu style. First staged in 1829. *Mitsumen Komori* is a popular Japanese classical repertory piece depicting the comical antics of a twelve year old babysitter girl from the Edo Period (1603-1867). Trying to soothe her crying baby, she uses three masks to play-act a funny skit. This was the piece that I would work on intensively with Hanayagi Kazu for five months in Tokyo.

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Meiji book

Meiji: Emperor of Japan by Donald Keene is an excellent read on the turn of the century changes that catapulted Japan from a feudalistic society governed by shoguns to an international imperialist force, dressed up in European customs and clothing.



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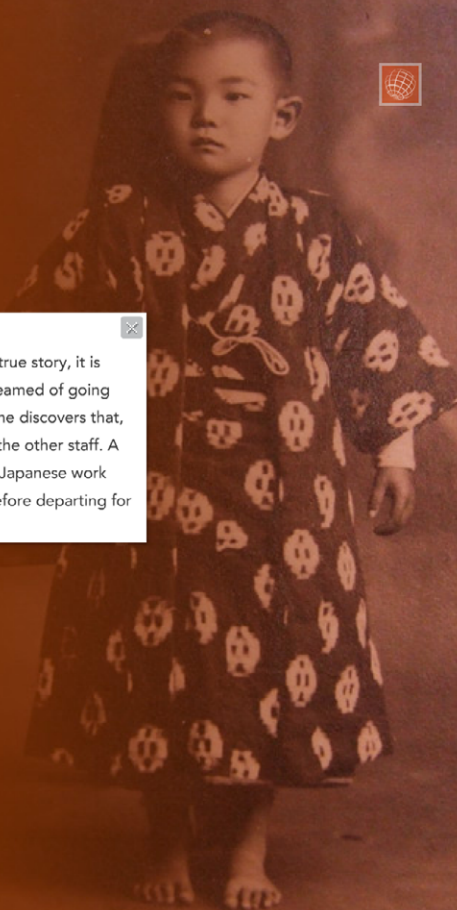
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Amelie

Amelie is the main character from the film *Fear and Trembling*. Based on a true story, it is about a young woman who'd lived in Japan as a young child and always dreamed of going back to work in a "real" Japanese company. She is shocked though when she discovers that, as a bottom-rank employee, she gets picked on mercilessly by nearly all of the other staff. A tragi-comic exposé of how powerful conformity and subjugation is within a Japanese work corporate works environment. I went to see this with my friend Chris just before departing for Japan.

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Business Card 1



9.10.05

"as if they were holding your soul in your hands": then the talk part. i was really nervous about speaking japanese, of course, and moreover about sharing some of my "hardship stories" in japan with a japanese audience. but Nobuko-san, one of the 3 main coordinators, is a journalist/dancer herself and spent alot of time with me on the phone beforehand, getting all the details of my life/career down. it felt natural to talk with her, as in a dialogue. so i asked her to sit near, and pitch in whenever i had a gap.

i wrote my name on a white board, first in full kanji characters, then in only katakana. talked about what kanji meant to me – the barrier to being fully japanese if you can't read them, a huge accolade, a sign that you've arrived, if you can. the importance of the character "hiro" (of hiroko) that was bestowed upon me by my late father, who wanted so much for me to have "universal knowledge." the pride of making my first bi-lingual business card in 2002, the japanese side in all kanji. to me, i was claiming my "true roots," as in Alex Haley ROOTS, during the now famous whipping scene—"what is your name? say TOBY!" to which the african man repeatedly answers: "Ku...nte K...in..te."

...vs. the lowliness, from my perspective, of katakana. just a kindergarten alphabet with blocky letters, with none of the beauty & symbolic hieroglyphic of kanji. used for animals, plants and foreign words. a marginal alphabet. my family history erased, made generic. phonetic.

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Nobuko-san

Ms. Nobuko Awaya, co-coordinator of Research Organization on Asian American Experience (Ajia-kei Amerika-jin Kenkyuhai). She had also been a student of Bharata Natyam and a university professor of intercultural studies in Japan. It was a pleasure to be able to share my dance and cross-national upbringing with her.

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Business Card 2



9.10.05

but how i learned upon presenting this kanji/english business card in JAPAN that it wasn't all about what i believed to be true. About the so-called "my-self." about the japanese sense of who gets to define "self."

i told the audience that when japanese people received my card, they glanced at the kanji name and just acted like i was "no big deal," tucked it away immediately, perhaps assuming i was an accompanying translator or administrative assistant to the entourage—an otherwise mixed race group of PA presenters, dancers, artistic directors. this is in high contrast to the way they receive katakana name cards—in both hands, eyes glued to the person's title, breathing reverently, asking many many enthusiastic questions about that person's background, view of dance, how they like japan so far... as all the "know japan" books say: they held this piece of paper in their hands as appreciatively as if they were holding that person's soul and identity.

anyway, i told them that this time, in 2005, i was advised to create a katakana/english card. wanting the "most" out of my fellowship this year, i complied, without still fully understanding. i felt like i was selling out, decorating myself with "foreign" handicaps unfairly, inaccurately. all the issues i fight against in the U.S.: "look at me! i'm noticeable because i'm different and exotic!"

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Business Card 3



9.10.05

so i turned to the audience! i said i'm still in the process of learning, not blaming. that when i've asked a few japanese people so far about "why" this happens, they say: "ah, soh desune..." can they, this audience, help me a little?

nervous smiles, anxious silence. from the beginning i worked to keep the atmosphere jovial, casual, conversational, which i think happened. one person ventured to say that she pays less attention to kanji cards cuz there's just too many of them after a while, whereas she preciously saves katakana cards cuz they're more rare. i let them go at that... and simply concluded that i was awakened to the "power of katakana" and the complexity of why it is the way it is.

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ah, soh desune
Literally, "oh, yes, right." Figuratively, a polite avoidance phrase like, "hmmmm, well..."

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Business Card 4



had a more frank & in-depth discussion with the coordinators about this later, which was enlightening. Sudo-san said that, for one, Japanese don't look at katakana as "low-level." they think of it as something special, a "highlighter" so to speak. Nobuko-san said that Japanese still have a tribal mentality. If you present yourself in kanji, you are claiming a full membership to the tribe, and that you have submitted yourself to all tribal expectations. a huge schism occurs when it's "revealed" that i don't have a japanese education, that i live in america, that i can't read/speak perfectly, that i'm not married already. the exact nature, intensity, & texture of that schism is still to be articulated, but it's like being thrown off your feet, shorting a fuse. their world order is disrupted. but by first "framing" myself as katakana-different, i'm giving them a warning signal—she's not what she looks like, prepare yourself. and then they can welcome me with interest & enthusiasm cuz it's no longer their job to try to fit me into the japanese puzzle.

most japanese-americans automatically self-present as "other" cuz one of their names (usually the first) will be foreign. or they simply don't speak any japanese at all and their body language is clearly from a different place. but in my case, i MUST CHOOSE to self-present as "other" in order to open smooth relationships here. it's just the "kinder," more considerate thing to do. the more "native" thing to do.

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Business Card 4



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Sudo-san

Mr. Tatsuya Sudo, the leader of the Research Organization on Asian American Experience (Ajia-kei Amerika-jin Kenkyukai). I was quite surprised when he contacted me in 2005, having seen my name on the Japan-U.S. Friendship Commission website. I had never met a Japanese living in Japan who had an avid interest in Asian American issues, let alone to have founded a lecture series with Asian American speakers. I attended one of their programs before my own lecture was scheduled. It was a fascinating panel with three octogenarian Japanese American men. Just before the outbreak of World War II, their families sent them unknowingly back to Japan in order to receive a Japanese education. When America declared war against Japan, these young boys tried to get back to the U.S. but couldn't. Paradoxically, they were conscripted into the Japanese army. It was moving to hear about how they coped, as teenagers, to fight as a Japanese soldier against America while being treated internally as the

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most Japanese-Americans automatically self-present as "other" cuz one of their names (usually the first) will be foreign. or they simply don't speak any Japanese at all and their body language is clearly from a different place. but in my case, I MUST CHOOSE to self-present as "other" in order to open smooth relationships here. it's just the "kinder," more considerate thing to do. the more "native" thing to do.

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Business Card 5



how does this make me feel? still questioning, though less annoyed & less guilty (about selling out). more patient. it took millenia of history to establish these tribal instincts, and a few centuries of world (imperialist) events that caused this over-appreciation of western things. and an island geography that sustained the sense of "us" as separate from "them," with very little "complicating" in between. and the government, as i've been reading more lately, has had an active hand in keeping it that way too. Chinese confucianism played a part. the *Edo* period is still important. so the "reality" of "hey! i can have a kanji name and still be complicated and interesting and likeable" is still in the future. hopefully, in the near future. and i so appreciate this Asian American organization for making that future even nearer through these seminars.

the vids went over well, it seemed. especially *Improvisation in Kimono* which i wasn't sure about showing in Japan. from *Stirrings at Dawn* (93—first independent work, to which much of the reaction was "I really like sushi") through the politically in-your-face *Daughter Tongue* (94—that garnered lots of opportunities for me) to my more abstract improvisations (96 & '01—hoping the body will speak its own (hi)story through movement), it was kinda funny to view it myself.

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Edo

Edo Period (1600–1868), ruled by the Shogunate, transitioned Japan from a medieval to a pre-modern society. Tightly ruled by Shogunate generals and fiercely resistant to foreign influences, the Edo Period gave birth to much of what is today considered culturally Japanese—Kabuki, ukiyoe prints and the geisha quarters. It is also a time when social and behavioral codes were tightly enforced.

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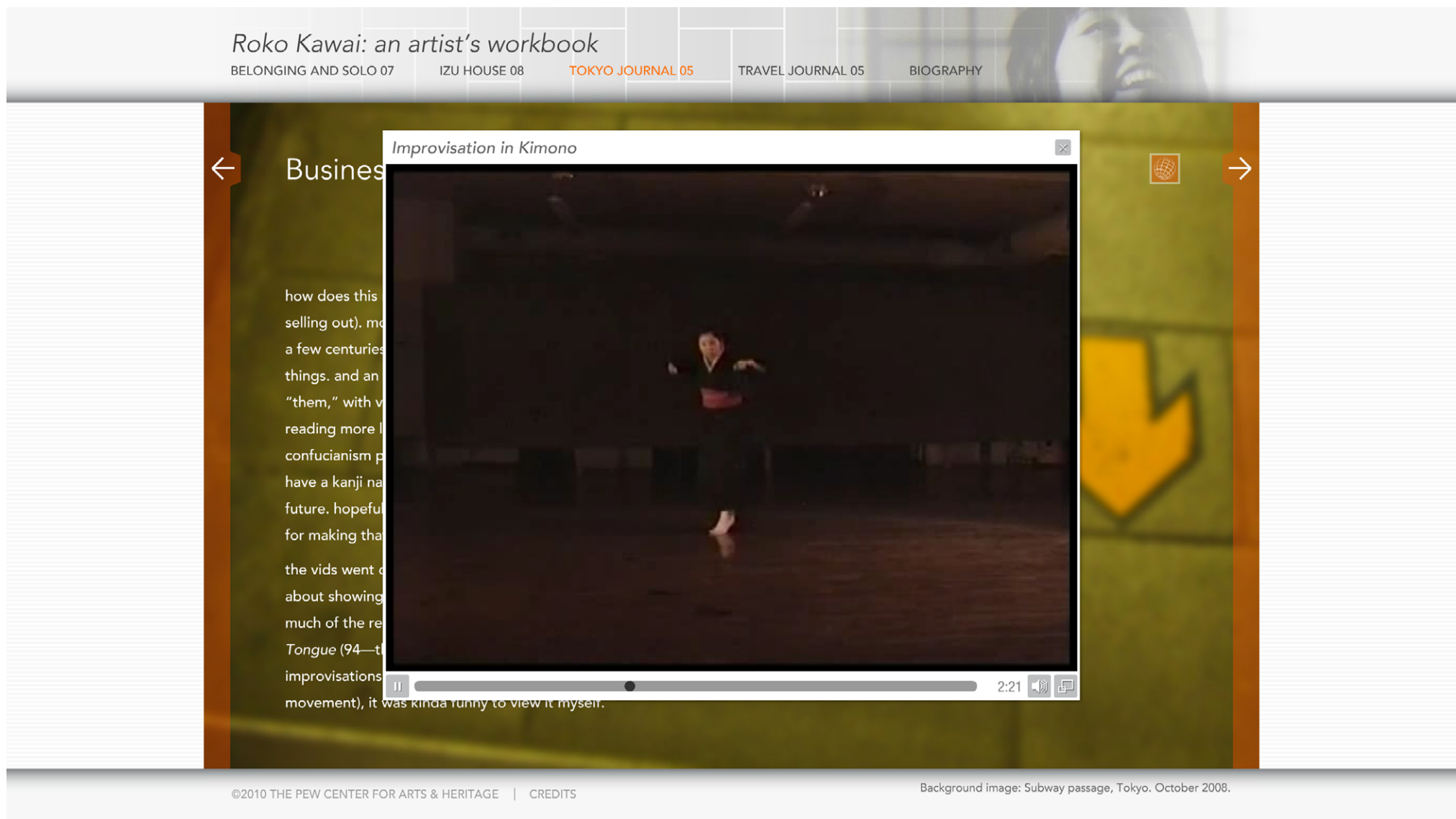
Improvisation in Kimono



3:45

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Improvisation in Kimono



1:08

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Asa No Mai / Stirrings at Dawn



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Business Card 6



...but last night's audience seemed to really GET how the nihon buyo is core, and seemed sincerely fascinated. how rewarding it was to get such a positive response for "Kimono." absolutely NO GEISHA comments (of course!). instead, many said they saw how the kimono served not as a "restrictor" to the body's movements (typical american response), but as a very specific guide/catalyst, which is exactly how i see it!

Nobuko-san said it contained something more alive (*Improvisation in Kimono*) than what we normally (even in japan) associate with kimono—all the stodgy formal gestures & fake smiles & poses found in tea ceremony, arranged marriage meetings, commercial photo studios, etc. she said she could see the grassroots hustle and bustle of the common folk of the Edo period, or working class women who used to put on kimono as everyday wear, busying themselves scrubbing floors, cooking rice, doing laundry, farming the field, hauling children on their backs. how their movement was defined but not restricted by the garment.

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Nihon Buyo

Japanese term for Japanese classical dance.

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Business Card 7



6.24.05

funny—I wasn't exotically traditional enough at appex/rice; here not exotic "white gaijin" enough. in the states, a mix of too much exotic-credit from audiences while simultaneously being the target of exotic-hatred from artists who are threatened by multicultural artforms (and funding). in AA circles, i'm often seen as not political enough (therefore, not person-of-color enough, doin' all that white post-modern abstraction stuff). in all cases, however, very few see me as who i am, without all the projections, working to hone my voice within the complexities of my background, thoughts, expressions.

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appex/rice

Asian Pacific Performance Exchange (APPEX), a six-week residency of the Center for Intercultural Performance, which brings together artists who engage in traditional and contemporary Asian performance genres. Rice refers to *The Art of Rice*, a performance collaboration co-created by Judy Mitoma and members of APPEX. I was invited to participate in both opportunities.

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gaijin

vernacular for gaikokujin, or foreigner. In my generation, it usually referred to a caucasian foreigner and often was used with a mix of adulation and trepidation.

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AA

Asian American

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Business Card 8



6.22.05 : EMBRACING DEFEAT

i understand about your dad not saying much. i think the war years left japanese & their JA counterparts wanting to just leave it be. i asked my mom if she wouldn't accompany me to Showa-kan, a huge museum on the years during hirohito's reign but famous for its vast archives around post-WW2 (immunized of course of the atrocities in Asia, the vagrant militarism of the government.) "Showa?" she said. "ugh, just reminds me of the misery of after the war. who wants to see that? you go by yourself & I'll wait outside." and so, even though i thought it would be a great way for mother & daughter to have conversation that was interesting to both of us, we ended up going to a fancy hotel restaurant buffet lunch instead. abundance. decadence. forgetting. reading "embrace" helps to explain some of this.

6.21.05 : WORKING THE FICTION

revisited from an american (or even cont jpn dnc) standpoint, this fiction is ridiculous. but this is the land of 97 ways of refering to the "self." there is no single, permanent self-identity. the concept doesn't exist here. so how you are treated can change in a single flip.

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Business Card 8



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atrocities in Asia, the vagrant

JA Common vernacular for Japanese American(s)

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"embrace"

Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II by John Dower. An amazing book about the transformation, and internal conflicts, of Japan under American occupation after World War II.

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Comfort Body 1

Who am I at 40? How do I feel in my own skin? Do I have to erase myself to become another? How do I maintain the self I feel good about? Why do I push that edge, rather than stay within comfort zones vs discomfort and pressure:

3.25.05

K-s urges people to "just get it out there" and worry about refinement later. better that than restraining all your thoughts, intentions, & larger motions & emotions inside. She wants us to "let it fly," and for us to trust that she will catch us in her safety net, her masterful eye, and guide us to beauty. but if we aren't used to letting it out, our dance will feel constrained, too thinking-ful, and eventually lack depth and dynamism.

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Background image: Roko with the youngest of the apprentices, ages three (left) and five (right). August 2005. Photographer unknown.

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Comfort Body 1

Who am I at 40? How do I feel in my own skin? Do I have to erase myself to become another? How do I maintain the self I feel good at? **K-s** edge, rather than stay within discomfort and pressure:

Abbreviation for Kazu-sensei, sometimes written as "Ks" or "K's."

3.25.05

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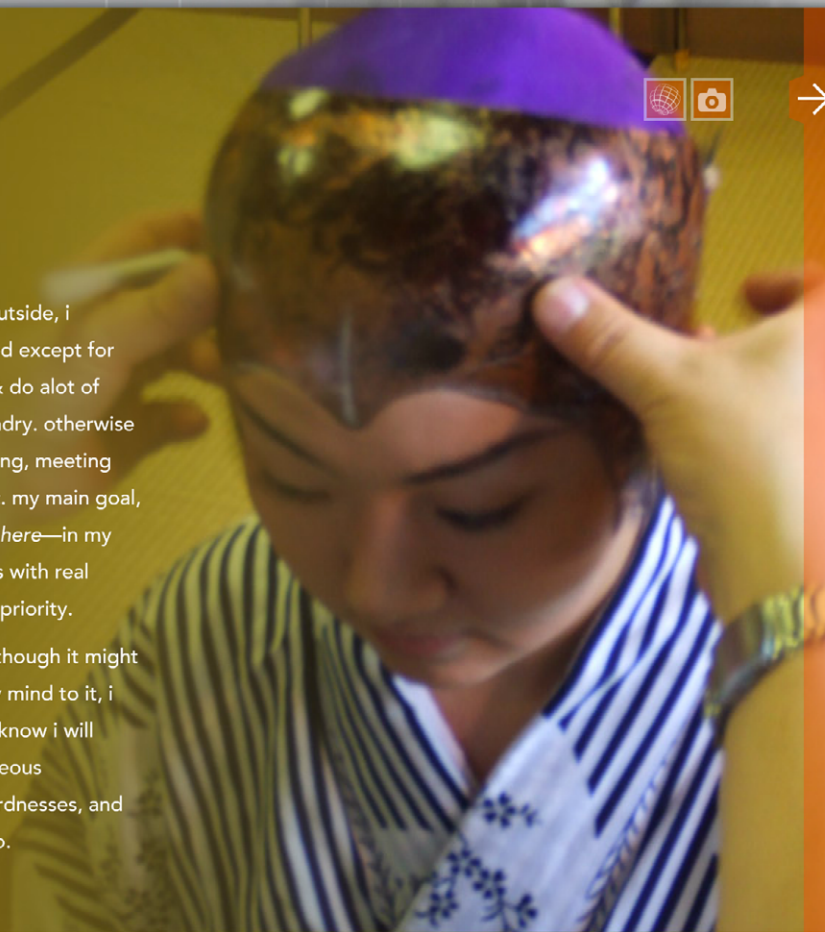
Comfort Body 2



6.29.05

i'm incorporating "cush" into my fellowship. from the outside, i probably look busy. but my days are mostly unscheduled except for the 2-3 okeiko days/wk. mornings i wake up real early & do alot of reading & writing. some yoga & dnc practice, hand-laundry. otherwise i go out to "be in japan." Meaning: riding trains, shopping, meeting friends. on more enlightened days, museums, perfs, etc. my main goal, i keep reminding myself, is to learn to feel *comfortable here*—in my body, my expression, my identity. & develop real bonds with real people. taking days to do "cultural shivasana" is a high priority.

so i've let go of pursuing intensive language lessons, although it might have been a very noble & worthy thing to do. if i set my mind to it, i could be quite fluent & literate even after 6 mths. but i know i will stress, lose my center, and have less to give to spontaneous interactions with people, to their warmth as well as weirdnesses, and to the space i can give myself to process when i need to.



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Background image: Master wig-maker customizing a wig-frame specific to the proportions of the dancer's head and face. August 2005. Photo by Karen Shimakawa.

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to the space i can give myself to process when i need to.

2-3 okeiko days/wk

Okeiko means lessons – which are marked by visits, not hourly instruction. If you go to okeiko you may be there all afternoon, even until midnight, observing other lessons and absorbing the social/spatial etiquette as part of your training. Your actual lesson may be as short as 15 minutes or as long as one hour – it's all up to Kazu-sensei who will decide what you need that day.

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"Cultural Shivasana"

My coinage. After being pulled, stimulated, challenged, bent and made to endure something effortful – like a yoga sequence or one day in Tokyo as a non-native—it is best if you can still yourself so that you have time to re-integrate your body and psyche.

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Comfort Body 3



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Background image: A Jizo (protector of children and travellers) stone at a Kamakura temple, July 2005.

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An advocate for making Japanese classical dance accessible across populations, Kazu-sensei teaches at several satellite sites including university dance departments as well as municipal community centers. Here she teaches youngsters at Mifuji Kindergarten, in the Nasu-Shiobara countryside two hours north of Tokyo. This boy respectfully reaches into a box of dance fans, careful not to rush because Kazu-sensei has told them that fans are delicate beings that will disappear if disturbed. May 2005.

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Getting ready for Kazu-sensei's dance class at Mifuji Kindergarten, in the Nasu-Shiobara countryside two hours north of Tokyo. May 2005.

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The youngest apprentice, age 3 with make-up and costume. Because the wig is so heavy and easily damaged, it is the last piece that is placed on the dancer before she enters the stages. August 2005.



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Roko with the youngest of the apprentices, ages three (left) and five (right). They performed the foundation dance of the Hanayagi school, *Kikuzukushi*, which is said to contain all the fundamental movements of Japanese classical dance. August 2005. Photographer unknown.

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4.21.05 : CONTACT IMPROV WORKSHOP / TOUCHING

the japanese ensemble C.I.co. (contact improv company) who is trying to forge a movement in japan for contact.

how fascinating to see contact improv in japan. [Steve Paxton](#) founded CI inspired by his experiences with [Aikido](#), but developed it into a distinctively American genre. now, as it "comes back" to Japan, it challenges dancers here to ignore alot of cultural conditioning. like making direct eye contact, giving up the responsibility of your own weight/burden to someone else, entering someone else's personal kinesphere—ie touch. these are all aspects that i would have imagined to be predictably "unjapanese."

but i also noticed how accessible, or "native," contact can be here. intuiting someone's intention non-verbally is automatic, therefore fluid and fun. taking in detail (of the room, temperature, other's movements) in a global, [propriosceptive](#) way is a piece of cake, immediately informative and stimulating. people don't get all spaced out as they do in the states, cuz they are already accustomed to integrating that internal space of observing with the outer world of action and reaction.

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Background image: Mural painting of field day by elementary students in Nishi-Ogikubo, Tokyo. September 2005.

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C.I.co

A Tokyo dance group: stands for "Contact Improvisation company," Since its founding in 2000, C.I.co. has been actively developing a contact improvisation community within the Japanese dance community, which includes a cross-fertilization with international artists. C.I.co. began "Dance Improvisation Festival Tokyo" in 2002. View website.

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Steve Paxton

Founder of contact improvisation

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Aikido

Japanese traditional martial art form in which one uses the force and momentum from the opponent as strength against him/her. This principal, it's said, inspired Steve Paxton to create contact improvisation in the U.S.

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proprioceptive

As I understand this word and its meaning: being aware of senses on our periphery (ends of limbs, for instance), often as an instinctive (vs. calculated/controlled) response through movement.

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Dance Ideas 2



and it's wonderful for me to participate and listen. to see the ye olde circle up in the beginning, the familiar exercises, the same sharing impressions with your partner bit. but to hear it conveyed in a different language. and because all the trendy advanced dancers clamored to get into Michael's workshop, Clco had mostly beginners, jazz dancers less familiar with partnering, etc. which made observing their "first-time contact experience" more vivid.

"kimochi-no warm up." what? oh, the passing the clap game. Chico-san described this as a warm up of your "feelings" (vs. physical body.) americans would have called it just a "simple warm up" or "something to wake you up, tune into the group." if you said that here, it likely would have been too intimidating. like, oh no, i have to do something with a group of strangers!

and indeed it was intimidating. i felt shy even though i'd done this exercise, taught it even, a million times. looking someone in the eye, smiling at a stranger, making a gesture at someone felt like such a risk! chico-san even said humorously that we have to be brave in this exercise because, as japanese, we aren't used to making solid eye contact.

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Background image: Koi Pond, Hirosaki Neputa Museum. June 2005.

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Michael's

Michael Schumacher, the featured instructor.

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Chico-san
Chico Katsube, founder of C.I.co. and lead instructor at the contact improvisation festival.

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Dance Ideas 3



people were “cute” in the beginning, as the instructors pointed out affectionately. they bowed their heads as they received a clap, or clapped quietly, or took a deep rushed inhale: “ah! ah!” when it wasn’t clear who, when & where the clap was coming from. a sign of urgency, of good tension—showing you are ready to react immediately, properly to a momentary confusion.

people laughed alot, and the clap got faster louder more in your face. like many beginning contact classes, anywhere, adults are just glad to have permission to interact with each other more freely.

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Background image: Ohito: Gym shoes washed and drying. Shuh-zu (shoes) were adopted in the early 20th-century when the education system westernized. October 2007.

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Dance Ideas 4



actually, i think the japanese language is quite perfect for contact.
there are so many nuanced verbs for receiving, granting, sharing,
sensing, giving, directing, facing.

sashi-ageru: to offer (as a gift) vs. ageru: to just give (like shove in
front of someone).

ukeru: to receive, accept vs. uke-toru: to reach out and take, or
morau: to just take/grab.

facing a partner is mukai-au: turning to meet someone.

very poetic. and open-ended as contact lingo tries to be in english.

gender.... gender....gender....

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Dance Ideas 5



3.25.05

especially at o-keikoba, where everything is spatially monitored. i feel floppy, uncoordinated in the small space where we change, cook/eat, use the bathroom. my limbs are floppy & feel like they may knock things over. i dash out with the "toilet" slippers still on instead of instinctively leaving them behind in the bathroom. i swing doors shut with a thrust that's too strong.

9.5.05 : ARLENE CROCE

(re: victim/autobiography vs. "high art"): RISD taught me best. teachers always insisted that you have to critically evaluate your choice of material and what you do with it. trash or gold, doesn't matter: does it work? should you have used something else? does it truly (i.e., visually) serve the theme? why? how?



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Background image: Blocking rehearsal: advanced apprentices keep notes for Kazu-sensei as a peer (dressed in bright red) rehearses "Kyoganoko Dojoji." July 2005.

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Dance Ideas 5



3.25.05

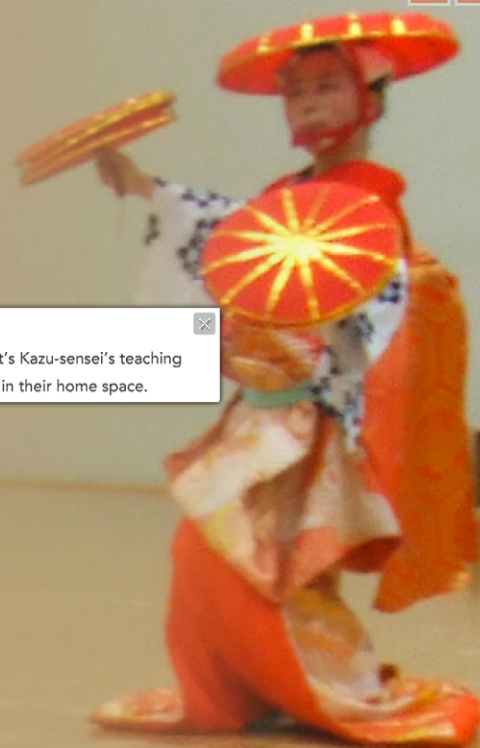
especially at o-keikoba, where everything is spatially monitored. i feel floppy, uncoordinated in the space. i don't know how to cook/eat, use the bathroom. i don't know how to use the space. i may knock things over. i dash out with the "toilet" slippers still on instead of instinctively leaving them behind in the bathroom. i swing doors shut with a thrust that's too strong.

o-keiko-ba

Okeiko refers to the lesson. Ba is the place of lesson. Therefore, it's Kazu-sensei's teaching space, which like most classical dance teachers is one large room in their home space.

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Dance Ideas 5



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RISD

Rhode Island School of Design. I attended RISD from 1982-84 as a painting major.

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Dance Ideas 6



8.11.05

my head and heart are spinning (and body too). i can't think straight these days. been waking up around 10am! what is happening to me? i'm lucky if i get the trash out on the right days and my kimono undergarments ironed.

yesterday was the BIG DRESS REHEARSAL (shitazarai) for our performance. it was such a great, long grueling day, especially since i was assigned to be my sensei's "tsukibito" (a person who sticks by you—like one of those sucker fish). essentially a spotter to assist in anyway possible. so, while other people had "down time" while spotting for each other, my day was one continuous focused spot-fest.

she did this intentionally, though, as a gift. it enabled me to be right there as she directed the rehearsal, interacted with musicians, production people, her own sensei, and japan's number one "tsuke" (person who clacks wood at specific timings during a kabuki play/dance). i watched as Yukari-chan, dressed as the regal and magnanimous LION fell backwards onto her butt (yikes!), and the secret comments that the higher sensei made about each dancer (all positive).

Background image: Kazu-Maika, one of Kazu-sensei's most advanced apprentices, rehearses for the first time with the weighty lion's mane of the classic *Kagamijishi*. July 2005.

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Dance Ideas 7



i got dressed up myself in the costume & wig (finally)! there is a bittersweet (secret) triumph in this moment. how i loved to be dressed this way in high school, when i was a member of the International Kabuki Club. but the director always favored "foreign" students in lead roles, so she would cast me in smaller and smaller roles, and finally as backstage "sock organizer."

so there i was, in costume, 23 years later, with live musicians, on a real hanamichi (the stage ramp that runs through the audience, a key performance area) ...

today, i join my aussie friends to look at a dancing mannequin robot in a gallery.

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Background image: Honban no Hi (day of show). Roko backstage with habutai (scalp cover) and make-up. August 2005.

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8.18.05

yesterday afternoon, I was literally falling asleep during Ks' lessons (with other students). could barely keep my eyes open. then my turn was next. uh-oh. her comment: "you looked exhausted. makes your dance not a child's dance style. the style is getting older and older."

part of it is, that i'm trying to "perfect" the form. to take out the zappy "american-ness" out of my dancing as i refine. but in so doing, i guess i'm losing the zappy 12 y.o. feel. well, this is what the lessons are about. as Ks says: we play "catch ball." the student "researches" & tries new things. then Ks has the opportunity to give feedback. she gets really pissed when some students don't do their homework. gives her nothing to work with.

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Background image: Roko preparing backstage on Shitazarai (dress rehearsal day). Our wigs and costumes are fully prepared for us to try but full make-up will happen only on the day of. August 2005.