



Profile

Hiroaki Umeda

Born in Tokyo in 1977, Umeda began creative activities in 2000, forming the group S20. The work *while going to a condition* that he presented at the Yokohama Dance Collection R in 2002 caught the attention of Rencontres Choreographiques Internationales festival director Anita Mathieu, who praised him by hailing "the birth of a promising young choreographer" and inviting him to perform at her festival. In 2003, he presented the work *Finore* in Montreal, Canada, and in 2004 the work *Duo* in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. After a short period of residence at the studio of Philippe Decouflé, he presented the work *Accumulated Layout* in 2007 as a joint production with the Chaillot National Theatre of Paris. He has performed by invitation at Belgium's Kunsten Festival, the Barbican Centre in London, the RomeEurope Festival, Paris' Pompidieu Center and other major international festivals and theatres in Europe and other parts of the world. In his works he does not only the choreography and dancing but also the video, sound and lighting by himself, thus leading to descriptions of Umeda as a visual artist and mover, rather than just a choreographer and dancer. In this way he has won acceptance in areas outside the dance world as well.

<http://www.hiroakiumed.com/>

Artist Interview

アーティスト・インタビュー

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Installations of the body and light The art of Hiroaki Umeda

身体と光のインスタレーション 梅田宏明の作法

Hiroaki Umeda is a visual artist and performer who has ventured onto the international scene with works created in a compact style that employs his own body and self-created video images, music and lighting tracks recorded on a single notebook computer. Since he first drew attention at the 2002 Yokohama Dance Collection R, Umeda has gone on to win praise of dance professionals around the world for the way he wraps his improvisational body movement in intricately woven spaces defined by light (video) and music with the beauty of an art installation. We talked with Umeda about his world of creativity as an artist of the current generation of young venture-business entrepreneurs who makes the computer his working partner.

(Interview: Tatsuro Ishii)

Dance leapt out of photographs

What was it that first got you interested in dance? We have heard that you majored in photography in college.

My father was a photojournalist and I liked the black & white photography of Daido Moriyama at the time, so I thought I would like to try working in photography. But once I started I just couldn't get into it. I ended up quitting it after about a year. It seemed to me that when I was photographing (as the photographer) it was necessary for me to step back from the surroundings and try to become objective, which wasn't interesting for me. I was wondering if there wasn't a way I could make it a more real-time form of expression (of more direct involvement), but those efforts didn't lead to much. So I began looking for another form of expression and that is when I discovered that there was this thing called dance and decided to give it a try.

I knew nothing about dance, however, so I began to study the range of dance forms that were around at the time. There was Saburo Teshigawara, Toru Iwashita, Kota Yamazaki, Min Tanaka, and Merce Cunningham and others. I also went to workshops but, to tell you the truth, they weren't very interesting to me. I didn't have a dancer's body, and there was also the fact that I didn't have the basic knowledge about dance, but I felt that if it were me, I could create something different. It wasn't that I was consumed in myself but rather I had a feeling that there was clearly a different type of dance that I wanted to see, something different that I wanted to create.

Up until that time in your life, had you been involved in anything like sports that in-

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involved using your body?

For about ten years, through middle school and high school, I played soccer.

After that you began attending dance workshops. What workshops did you actually attend?

In the contemporary dance field I took workshops with Teshigawara and Yamazaki. I also attended the dance school PAS led by the dance critic Roku Hasegawa, where I tried a number of things, from hip hop, ballet and jazz dance to African dance and pantomime. The end result was that, indeed, what I was looking wasn't in any of these, so after about a year I quit all the lessons. I realized that I didn't want to become a dancer, instead I wanted to create works.

So, did you start creating works right away?

I thought I would give it a try and, in 2000, I rented a small theater in Hachioji, in the suburb of Tokyo, and did about a one-hour solo performance. Looking back, I know that it was not a very interesting performance at all, but that experience made me realize that dance productions require a large outlay in terms of fees for the music and lighting people. So, I decided to acquire the skills I would need to do it all myself with a computer and started working part-time at an IT company. There I taught myself the skills I would need for that. I am of the first generation where anyone can use a computer with ease, so none of this seemed difficult to me.

For about two years after that I was creating short pieces of about five minutes that I entered in showcase-type performance events for young dancers.

The work that can be considered your true debut work is surely *while going to a condition*, which you performed at the 2002 Yokohama Dance Collection R. In your works there is a distinctive way you move the joints and muscles with a wave-like flexibility. Light and music play an important role in the development of these works through a 3-way interaction with the body of the dancer at the middle of the performance space. At times you use fast movement and throughout the pieces you are moving constantly at a certain level of speed, which constitutes quite a load of physical exertion. This style has remained the same from that debut work up until the present. That work [*while going to a condition*,] has become one of your representative works that has been performed numerous times since.

In the [Yokohama] Dance Collection there was the Rencontres Choregraphiques Internationales Seine-Saint-Denis (former Bagnolet International Choreography Award) and the Solo × Duo Competition, and I entered both of them. Seeing the piece I entered in Solo × Duo, the dance critic Masashi Miura said that I should try creating pieces that used the stage a bit more. Hearing that, I worked to create a new piece in the two weeks before the Rencontres Choregraphiques, and the work I came up with was *while going to a condition*. Although I didn't win the award, I caught the attention of the director Anita Mathieu. She invited me to perform at Bagnolet. Some people think that invitation came because I won the Rencontres award, but in fact I didn't. That is a rather important point to me (laughs).

That led to a sudden opening of many opportunities to perform overseas. Although you weren't in fact a Rencontres award winner that Yokohama Dance Collection ap-

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pearance marked an important turning point in your career, didn't it? What kinds of reactions did your performances at Bagnolet bring?

I had very little experience with performing in front of audiences up until that time, so I didn't really have anything to compare it with, as I wasn't even familiar with the reactions of the Japanese audiences. After my performances at Bagnolet a variety of people came up to talk with me, so I was thinking that the reaction must be very good, but looking back now I realize that it was probably mostly a cultural difference and just the normal reaction for a European audience (laughs). And even though I had then performed overseas like that, when I came back to Japan nothing had changed in my life really. I was still working at a part-time job to support myself as I continued to create works.

When we in Japan hear the name Hiroaki Umeda, we immediately think of a dancer who made a name for himself at the Yokohama Dance Collection and then went to Europe and never came back to Japan. I think there are also many people besides myself that have this impression, but is the truth that you didn't move your base overseas?

That is another misunderstanding that many people have. I never moved overseas and I never quit dance (laughs). After Bagnolet I got a number of invitations to perform right away, but to tell the truth, that was the first time I had ever been paid to do dance performances and I was asking myself, "What is this strange world [of professional dance]?" And I had no idea what would happen if I continued to work in that way. Since my performances at Bagnolet led to other performance engagements, I just continued accepting any offers I was given to go and perform somewhere. It was all I could do just to get used to the system and learn what kind of pace I should work at and how to do these world tours.

Anyway, I had no consciousness of trying to make it as a dance professional. All was thinking about was creating works based on the kinds of things I wanted to express and going to perform whenever I received an offer. You might say that I was just doing things at my own pace, and that was a rather easy pace, too. After working at my part-time job for the day I go home and start dancing in my own room.

You don't use a studio space for practicing and working on creating your pieces in that kind of environment?

No. I have always just used my own room. Sometimes I practice moves while riding on the trains as well. It is still very seldom that I go to a studio to practice. So, I often joke that I don't move around much, but I would be in trouble if people actually believed that (laughs).

In 2002 and 2004 you toured Europe with support from the Japan Foundation. Then you continued to be invited to perform overseas, presenting *Finore* at the Nouvelle Dance Festival in Montreal, Canada, and *Duo* at the Panorama Dance Festival in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 2004. For your works you create the lighting, music and video yourself and have that data all on one laptop computer. With that computer you can go into any space, even overseas, and perform with no hassles, can't you? That is great. All the other [Japanese] artists, especially when they go overseas, they are struggling to communicate with the local staff and get things together, right up to the

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Haptic

Premiere: 2008

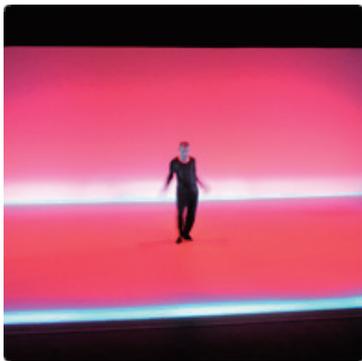


Photo: Shin Yamagata

time of their opening performance.

That's right. I even amaze myself for thinking up such an amazing system (laughs). All I have to do is check the stage and then connect my computer and with a click on the keyboard I'm ready to start performing. It may look like I am using difficult technology, but in fact I'm only doing things that anyone could do with the ubiquitous [computer] technology. After around the year 2000, computer performance quickly caught up with the types of things I wanted to use it for in my works, making it very easy to do things that were quite sophisticated. I often get offers to do collaborations with creators who are using much higher level technologies, but to me technology is nothing more than a tool, and I really don't have any desire to pursue forms of expression using high-level technologies. I am just using the computer at the same level as we all do in our daily lives. In Europe I often see performances that look almost like technology presentations, but I have no interest in doing that type of thing.

In 2007 you presented *Accumulated Layout* in a joint production with the Chaillot National Theater in Paris. That work was very well received and has been performed since around Europe, the Middle East, S. Korea and at Japan's New National Theater.

In 2006, when I performed at a small theater in Paris I met my present producer, Dominique Laulanné, and that became a turning point for me. Up to that point I had been having a few performances a year, but thanks to Dominique things began to connect rapidly. Dominique is Philippe Decouflé's producer and I did *Accumulated Layout* during a three-week period of residency at Decouflé's studio.

It appeared to me that *Accumulated Layout* is a work in which you seemed to use lighting in a more 3-dimensional way than in previous works, a work where you were thinking about how the entire space was viewed. Were you using any new devices that you hadn't used before?

My producer put pressure on me by saying that I was going to perform this work at Chaillot so I should work especially hard on it (laughs). I wanted to create a work that was particularly strong visually, so I thought a lot about things like how to increase the visual depth by varying the volumes of light, etc. Technically there wasn't anything especially new that I did, but I was aware that I hadn't really much analytical thinking about plans in the past and so, I guess you could say that I did more cerebral work on the question of how I could create visual variety. And this became the first work that I felt real gratification for the critical acclaim it received. It was also from this time that I got an agent working for me in Paris.

Installations of light and body that start from drawings

In March of 2009 you presented your latest solo work *Haptic* at the Yokohama Red Brick Warehouse. In it you made use of bright colors and there was great beauty in the changes in the light in relation with your body movements. It was also a work that can be said to lie on the same line of development with *while going to a condition* in terms of the methodology used. It convinces me that your creative method has not changed since that debut work. What seems to distinguish this work is your attitude that you are not simply creating a dance work. Instead your work is the total of every-

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thing happening on the stage: the lighting, the sound and the body. One could say that it is a work that showed even more clearly than before the creative direction you have inside you. In that sense, this can't really be called a dance work but rather an art work perhaps, or a type of installation of body, sound and light.

Yes. That style has not changed since the beginning. I don't want to plan lighting and music in order to show the dance. Rather, I believe that the body (physical movement), the light and the sound are all elements with the same value. By the way, the title "*Haptic*" comes from the Greek word *haptesthai* (the sense of touch) in the adjective form.

Your dance is primarily based in improvisation. So, can we assume that your creative process for your solo works involves first creating a visual image with the video and sound and then doing improvisational dance within the framework of that image?

At the beginning there is no visual image or dance image. It is a more abstract image, like an image of the tension of the space, and I work that up with drawing. When I say drawing, I don't mean like a picture, or painting. It is purely line. For me those lines are like a musical score, and it is following that score that I think about the dance and sound and colors. Since it is [drawn] line, there is a temporal axis and so, of necessity, the sound comes first, and then I begin thinking of the dance and lighting simultaneously as I am creating the sound. And the feeling is one of maintaining an overall balance of these elements as I create the work.

Can you describe in more specific terms how the line and temporal axis?

For example, with *while going to a condition* it was quite simple lines, like, "Now I am raising the tension." With *Accumulated Layout* it was a bit more complex, but it was in essence an abstract image in the beginning. If you asked me what the image was it would be difficult for me to explain, but I use the word *jodo* (emotion). If I were to define it, it would be something like the "feeling just prior to emotion." It is also close to "desire" perhaps. It is something very primal.

In my dance I also use this concept of primal emotion (*jodo*) as a measure when evaluating movements. You could say that I search for movement that fits the concept of primal emotion, asking myself if a movement fits it or not as a standard for judgment. But it is not a matter of fine distinctions such as the particular angle of the arms or hands at any one moment in the dance movement. It is a more abstract image. In this way I decide the overall rules for a piece and then 80% of it is improvisation based on those rules.

When you dance solo like that, in almost all your works you position yourself in the middle of the stage space and don't move much from that point to the sides or forward and backward. Why is that?

That is for a completely different reason. It comes from the fact that I don't find much meaning in moving around [the stage]. Rather, I believe that establishing a clear point in the center of the space is more important in terms of creating consciousness of the space.

With Merce Cunningham's dance, for example, he used dancers as "points," whether he was dancing or choreographing for other dancers. However, in his case, although

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he used the dancers as points, he tended to deliberately avoid the center point. So, unlike you, Cunningham created spaces with no center point. It may be partly because you have been dancing solo for a long time, but you definitely appear to have a focused concern for the center point.

Yes. I believe it would appear that my concern is for the center. The important thing is that I don't want to show the size of the stage. I don't want to show the limitations of the stage space by moving around in it. The reason for the [unmoving] point is that it provide a point from which expansion [artistic expansiveness, outspreading] is possible. That is something that is very important to me. My intension is to create a fixed point in the center from which the audience can become conscious of a large spatial possibility.

You just mentioned about using drawing to work up an abstract image. Is there any larger concept of the overall work that precedes the drawing stage and sets the prerequisites for it?

Yes, there is. There is something that sets the larger initial framework for the things I want to express in the drawing stage, and I call that framework the work's "concept." At the risk of these concepts sounding irresponsibly broad, and I don't believe they are, for example, in the case of *Haptic* the concept was "color" and in *Accumulated Layout* it was the tactile sense, in *Adapting for Distortion* it was perceptual illusion. I get inspirations for these concepts from everyday life and then I bring them to the stage in a form that embodies what I want to express [what has emerged in the drawings].

In *Adapting for Distortion* you use a video that includes a number of moving lines, which seemed to show a strong emphasis on visual effects.

I had strongly experienced the fact that dance is mainly viewed as a visual art. For example, thinking about how a dance form like ballet came to have the type of movement it does, I believe it resulted from an overriding concern for form, such as how to make the most beautiful [body] lines, or how to make the most beautiful combinations of vertical and horizontal lines. If that is true, it seemed to me that dance would be treated mainly as a visual art form. I even dislike watching dance on video and having my dance be watched on video, so I find it stressful knowing that dance is treated that way.

Therefore, if it is being treated primarily from a visual standpoint, it seemed to me that as long as you controlled the visual aspect, anything could become dance. That is the kind of twisted viewpoint I came to think about. That led me to the idea of calling it visual performance from the start and bringing the visual to the forefront as the concept for my works. For example, I created the work *DUO* in which I have the real me dancing alongside a videotaped image of me dancing, which was a concept that came directly from that stressful aspect I had been feeling. I very much wanted to show the changes that take place when my actual physical body is transcribed into a video image. I wanted to show how something different emerges when one focuses on the visual and shows it as visual performance.

Our society today is strongly influenced by the power of the media, to the point that people think everything that is broadcast [on the news] is real. But is it really? In media news high priority is placed on visual images, but is that really where the truth

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lies? I have a very strong tendency to question that and doubt it.

In that sense, I think *Duo* is successful. Despite the clear focus on the visual, we don't know whether it is purely a visual work or if it actually hiding another deeper aspect that is also functioning in the work. The answer of course is left up to the audience and how they perceive the work individually. There may be people who read deeply into the work and others who feel some kind of metaphoric reference to the fictional and the real, or there may be others who simply enjoy the visual aspects of it. I believe that the fact that it contains such deep possibilities means that that the original plan for the work has been successful. However, even though we refer to it with the single word "visual," there are actually many different forms of expression and artistic directions that fall under that description. Is there a particular direction that you are aiming in with the use of this visual approach?

With regard to the visual, I am very interested in the function of the "eyes." The eye is a receptor for light. For example, when we see you here before my eyes and when we see you on television, we recognize both as you, Ishii-san. That is something that causes me to question that recognition, and since I want to distill things down purely to the function of the eye as a light receptor, I choose to do things like using very abstract video images and manipulate the volumes of light. Also, since I am aiming in the direction visuals that do not elicit cerebral judgments about the information involved in the light perceived, but rather seek a more physical and primitive perception of the light, I most often use black & white.

The way you use sound is usually in continuing noise-type patterns. Do you have any specific concepts concerning sound?

With sound as well, I choose it on the basis of its physical qualities. Thus, for example, I eliminate any sort of melody as much as possible. Melody has a feeling that is close to verbalization for me, and that is not what I am looking for. I want to think of sound in terms of the vibration of air, or as a something physical.

Does that mean that you want to think of both the visual aspect and sound on the physical level, like myoelectrical reactions?

That's right. What I often say recently is that, rather than looking at it as dance, I want the audience to experience the space. I am very much interested in the possibilities of bringing about a change within the people in the audience via the tension, the sound and the light of my stages. In other words, I'm interested in the possibilities of my performances as a stimulus to the audience. In fact, I think that is the reason why my performances are well received overseas. The fact that my works don't cost much to produce and that I can perform them alone may also have something to do with it, but I believe also that the fact that my works are of a type that appeal to the audience on a physical level, it means that people can watch them without any special knowledge about the cultural background from which they have emerged.

I the creation of your works, is there anything in particular that you absolutely cannot compromise on?

That would be timing, the sense of time. According to my way of thinking, the way (and timing) in which variation and change occurs in the work is extremely important and

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1. *centrifugal*

Premiere: 2009

Choreographer : Hiroaki Umeda

Dancer: Satu Rekola, Milla Koistinen, Nat-suko Kuroda



Photo: Shin Yamagata

can't be compromised. It is really only moments of change that we perceive.

Considering the fact that you played soccer for so long and undoubtedly had your physical perceptions conditioned by soccer, as I listen to you I can't help but feel that your dance has something in common with soccer. In soccer you can't play well unless you are reacting with skillful timing to the changes taking place around you second by second. Rather than trying to dance skillfully or beautifully, it seems that your dance is a type of holistic performance in which our body is constantly reacting dynamically and with perfect timing to the changes in the taking place in the sound and light moment by moment. And because it has that holistic performance quality, it doesn't really matter if it is called dance or not.

I don't think in the usual dancer's mindset, and I have the sense that I am not really a dancer type. And it is true that when I dance it is as physically demanding (and tiring) as playing soccer. And my dance may also have things in common with soccer in the sense that the ultimate aim is to score a goal no matter how you do it and it only matters if you are able to express what you want to express.

Your work *while going to a condition* has been performed by you many times all around the world. In such a case, artists often tend to get in a rut and lose inspiration performing the same thing over and over. But it seems to me that hasn't happened in your case because, even though the main outline of the work remains the same, 80% of the movement is improvisation, which enables you to react with a fresh attitude and movement each time. In the case of soccer as well, although the rules and the team members are the same each time, every game brings completely different spaces and timing to react to, doesn't it?

I feel that definitely to be true. I very much dislike setting the choreography to a point that it stops any new developments. I distinctly choose improvisation so that I have the freedom to react in real time to what I feel. However, there are times lately when I am bothered with the feeling that it is not really that smart [cool], but my soccer type sense of physical drive keeps me from quitting it (laughs).

About group works

The work *1. Centrifugal* that premiered in Finland recently is the first group work you have choreographed, which was for two Finnish and one Japanese dancer.

The Yokohama Municipal Arts Foundation and the Finnish Dance Information Center planned a 3-year choreographer exchange program and I was chosen as the choreographer for the second year of that program. Our work was supposed to end with the performance in Finland, but Yokohama said they wanted to do a production of it here, too. So we had performances in March of this year at the Yokohama Red Brick Warehouse.

Was it you that chose the three dancers?

I asked for young female ballet dancers who could do physically demanding movement and I let the people in Finland choose them. Other than that, everything was left up to me as an opportunity for cross-cultural experience. For someone like me who has no experience in choreographing for others, it was a very good program, I believe.

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It seems to me that choreographing for others is a job on a completely different dimension from doing your own solo dance. How was it?

What I decided to focus on was not choreographing a piece that was just a transcription of what I normally do myself but to think up a system that would naturally bring out the same kind of reactions involved in my dance. I wanted to create a methodology that would transplant my physical [movement] assets into those two women so that we could share in the same type of movement.

What did you actually do in specific terms?

First of all, I started from the stance and walk that are the fundamentals of my movement. I gave them demonstrations and also verbal instruction, but it proved to be virtually impossible for people who are doing ballet. I believe that is because my movement is something that has been rationalized via my own body and, as a result, I guess it is movement that originates in the Asian body.

What it involved was giving them specific directions such as “find your center of gravity on the heels” and “keep your knees bent,” but they weren’t able to use the body in that way. For ballet people, the center of gravity is taken with the hips in an “en dehors” position and the weight laced on the outside of the heels, which is the opposite of what I do. I move the hips back a bit and put the weight on the insides of the heels and set the hips over that base. When you take that position the chest is thrust outward slightly.

That description of the position of the hips and the center of gravity is similar to the posture used in Noh dance, isn’t it?

Perhaps it is, yes. As key words, the center of gravity is determined not just by the hips but by the chest as well. When the three points of the heels, the center of gravity of the hips and the chest are lined up properly, you can stand easily without tension. It is very easy to relax in that stance and your movements from that position can become very fast. I call it the neutral position and it is the position that I arrived at experientially as a result of thinking about the problem of how to avoid getting off balance.

What did you do after trying to teach them your “neutral position?” They didn’t just do improvisational dance after that, did they?

In our practice sessions I did have them do a considerable amount of improvisational movement. I didn’t use any choreographic designations but rather gave them systems and theory to work from to develop movement that I then chose from to compose the piece. When working with a group, the direction I want is to have everyone working from a shared base but also bringing out their own individuality, I watched to see what kinds of elements they would bring to the work and held off on making my decisions about the final composition until quite late in the creative process.

In terms of your solo dance, choreographing for other dancers and your own physical [movement] development, what kinds of things are you thinking about for the future?

In my solo work, I believe I will continue to do experimental work using sound and video. Thanks to my years of soccer training, I still have the toughness to continue the kind of anaerobic dance style I have used until now, but I think I can only continue to do so for maybe another five years. So, I am going to be thinking about what I want

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to do in terms of artistic expression after that. With regard to choreography, I want to take about ten years to really do it seriously. That ten-year period is the same time period as I have come thus far after starting dance. I believe it is going to take that long to do what I want to achieve artistically in that area. By the way, my next choreographed piece is being done with a French hip-hop dancer. The concept for my recent work *1. Centrifugal* was centrifugal force and I am thinking of making “response” the concept for my next work. For example, when you take a step, there is some degree of return action, isn’t there? This return action or response is something that I use in my dance a lot, so I am thinking of making this the theme of my next choreographed work.

Also, after another five years I want to try a dance work without dance. Talking about this now would start to sound like sophism, so I am going to wait before talking about it in more detail (laughs). It doesn’t mean a dance work that is not danced by dancers but a dance work created with lighting and sound but no bodies on the stage. I want to do that and call it a dance work (laughs).