

Interview with Kumiko Ueda

Stage Director – choreographic creation project

**Q — At the beginning of this project, the title was
When Does Time Become Beauty?
Does that mean that, for you, time is not beautiful?**

Kumiko Ueda —

When I used to work in an office in Tokyo, I had to sit in front of my computer from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Whether there was actual work to do or not. Apart from the lunch break, I simply had to be there.

Sometimes, I even had to pretend to be working.

Those eight hours were the time during which I sold my freedom to act to the system, so that I could eat and pay my rent. I felt that this time was less about producing something than about controlling behavior. It was very violent, almost grotesque.

Being managed all year long by a fixed schedule, 9 a.m.–6 p.m., made me feel as though I had become a machine. Whether it was day or night, 7 hours remained 7 hours, and everyone acted at the same time, without ever questioning this framework.

This total obedience to an abstract time, measured by the mechanical clock, has always deeply disturbed me.

Q — So what is “beautiful time” for you?

Kumiko Ueda —

When I was a child, evening made me incredibly sad.

When the light began to fade, I would start crying for no reason, to the point of embarrassing my mother.

Today, as an adult, I no longer truly feel the evening. It is 7 p.m., so we have dinner. It is 11 p.m., so we go to sleep to be in shape the next day. Time has become a series of functional steps, a schedule.

But the relationship to time in childhood, before any socialization, that time may be much closer to beauty.

Henri Bergson writes that lived time, duration, is not homogeneous and cannot be measured mathematically. I feel that the modernization of time has replaced a time made of qualitatively different experiences with a homogeneous time, divided into equal units, like points in space.

Q — The new title of your project refers to reproduction.

What connection do you make between the modernization of time and reproduction?

Kumiko Ueda —

A friend told me about a very concrete experience she had as a mother. As I listened to her, I felt that there might be an alternative temporality, very different from modernized time, and that this temporality passes through the bodies of women who experience pregnancy and childbirth.

She spoke to me about an extremely difficult moment: her baby would not stop crying, and in exhaustion, she finally breastfed the child on a station bench.

According to her, this baby lived in a circular time, almost animal. A time without projection into the future, where days and years repeat themselves.

Around them, the trains, the passersby, the entire city obeyed another logic: that of social time, linear, irreversible, moving toward tomorrow without ever tolerating the slightest delay.

She was the only one who had to constantly move from one to the other.

And this friction between two radically distant temporal regimes, she experienced as violence.

As I listened to her, I suddenly remembered very precisely the sensation of evening when I was a child.

Q — You do not have children.

Do you think that mothers, through pregnancy and caring for children who are still “unsocialized,” recover a temporality that you yourself have forgotten?

Kumiko Ueda —

I cannot be sure, since I have not experienced this myself.

But for the first time, I imagined very concretely that this shift in temporality for mothers might be accompanied by a form of exclusion from social time, and by a constant anxiety related to delay.

Since then, I have been conducting interviews with women who have children, about their experiences of pregnancy and motherhood.

I am also creating with collaborators who have young children.

Q — What have you discovered through these interviews?

Kumiko Ueda —

Many women begin by saying:
“It’s not interesting, it’s banal.”

Talking about childbirth or education has long been considered trivial in our society. Perhaps these words have never been taken seriously for that reason.

Their stories are not homogeneous; they cannot be summarized or generalized. But I believe that the simple act of listening to them together has great value. Personally, I have rediscovered the importance of listening.

Before, when a baby cried next to me on an airplane, I felt irritated. I could neither read, nor work, nor sleep. I felt that I was losing my time.

Those cries were, for me, just noise, like an alarm clock I was not allowed to turn off.

But an actress I work with, Olga Mouak, once told me that, for a mother, the baby is a being constantly exposed to the possibility of death, and that its cries are like a vital alarm, a signal that pierces the body and forces a response.

Since then, I listen to those cries differently. I try to imagine the mother's anxiety behind that sound.

Q — Has this changed the way you look at society?

Kumiko Ueda —

Yes.

I began to feel anger toward a society that considers the slow and inefficient temporality necessary to accompany vulnerable beings like children as a disadvantage.

It is a society dominated by those who run at maximum speed, in search of the highest possible productivity.

And I myself am part of it.

Q — Why conduct this research in Europe, and not in Japan?

Kumiko Ueda —

I was born in Japan, in a country where time measured by the clock is omnipresent. Yet this conception of time was introduced there only about 150 years ago.

Before that, time was divided between sunrise and sunset. An "hour" was longer in summer, shorter in winter. Night also varied according to the seasons. The lunar calendar was used, and even the date could differ from one region to another.

Making time and the calendar into tools for managing and controlling populations was introduced very late in Japan.

It is said that the management of labor through time began in Europe, with merchants during the age of exploration, and that this temporality spread throughout the world with the mechanical clock.

I wanted to understand what effects this process had on bodies and human lives, by questioning both European societies and former colonized territories.

Q — So capitalism and globalization transformed your relationship to time?

Kumiko Ueda —

Yes.

150 years ago, Westerners criticized Japanese people for sometimes arriving two hours late to an appointment. That shows how little my ancestors were subjected to clock time.

Today, Japan is one of the strictest countries in terms of punctuality and overwork, and also one of those with the lowest birth rates.

Q — Do you think there is a link between not having had a child and this modern temporality?

Kumiko Ueda —

Yes. Of course, there are personal factors. But I also have the feeling that the world did not allow it.

I sometimes fear that society has transformed something fundamental in me, and that later I may find myself with the feeling of having missed my life and of being alone.

Q — So your work seeks to question these issues through temporality?

Kumiko Ueda —

Yes. I want to make visible a temporality that we breathe like air, without seeing it. A temporality constructed from the “healthy” male body, in order to maximize productivity.

Even today, too many spaces — offices, stations, theaters — remain inaccessible to those who cannot move at full speed. Parents with children, tired bodies, vulnerable bodies are excluded.

Rather than integrating more and more people into this violent temporality, I would like to attempt the opposite:

to try to integrate everyone — men, women without children, workers — into the temporality of children and those who care for them.

For me, this is a form of resistance against the acceleration of violence and competition in the contemporary world.

Interview conducted by Tetsumi Gaida