

# Whitney Museum of American Art 83 New American Film and Video Series

*Eiko & Koma*

May 28–June 21, 1998

*Breath*, 1998.

A live installation, on view continuously.

**Components:**

Two live performers; videotape, color, silent; video projector; audiotape; audio amplifier; speakers; fans; windchimes; raked platform; fabric composed of tea-stained silk and dried leaves; organic materials; specified lighting.

Movement, setting, video, and audio by Eiko & Koma; lighting by Eiko & Koma and Scott Poitras.

Assistants to Eiko & Koma: Kozue Oshiro and Testuma Shimizu.

Eiko & Koma's presentation at the Whitney Museum was made possible in part by grants to their producing organization, Inta, Inc., by the Lila Acheson Wallace Theater Fund and The Japan Foundation Performing Arts JAPAN Program.



*Eiko & Koma*, 1998. Photograph: © Judy Linn.

For over twenty-five years, Eiko & Koma have been creating theatrical presentations that juxtapose their own moving figures within an environment usually composed of organic materials, lighting, and sound. But unlike most theatrical artists, who create only one aspect of their works, Eiko & Koma often design all the elements in their presentations, as they have in *Breath*, their first visual art installation. Moreover, theatrical productions have strict opening and ending times, while the viewing experience in a museum is unstructured. Eiko & Koma will be on view seven hours a day during the entire four weeks of the exhibition. Time, in fact, explored through movement, elements of setting, lighting, and perspective, becomes the focus of *Breath*.

Eiko & Koma trained in the avant-garde theatrical movement styles emerging in 1960s Japan as well as

German Expressionist dance styles of the 1920s. From these codified structures of movement, they developed their own style, based on the natural, nonrepetitive movements of the body. Since the early 1970s, they have been exploring ways in which the human body can retard and accelerate its movements to reflect the erratic motion in nature. In slower movement especially, their bodies metamorphose from form to form, emphasizing the sculptural shapes of each momentary pose. Eiko & Koma frequently eschew costuming and perform nude—a natural state shared by other creatures and even geological forms—as a means to accentuate the human body's relationship to nature.

The intent of the artists here is to elicit an emotional response from the viewer. Since we share a primeval state of cellular development with all living organisms,



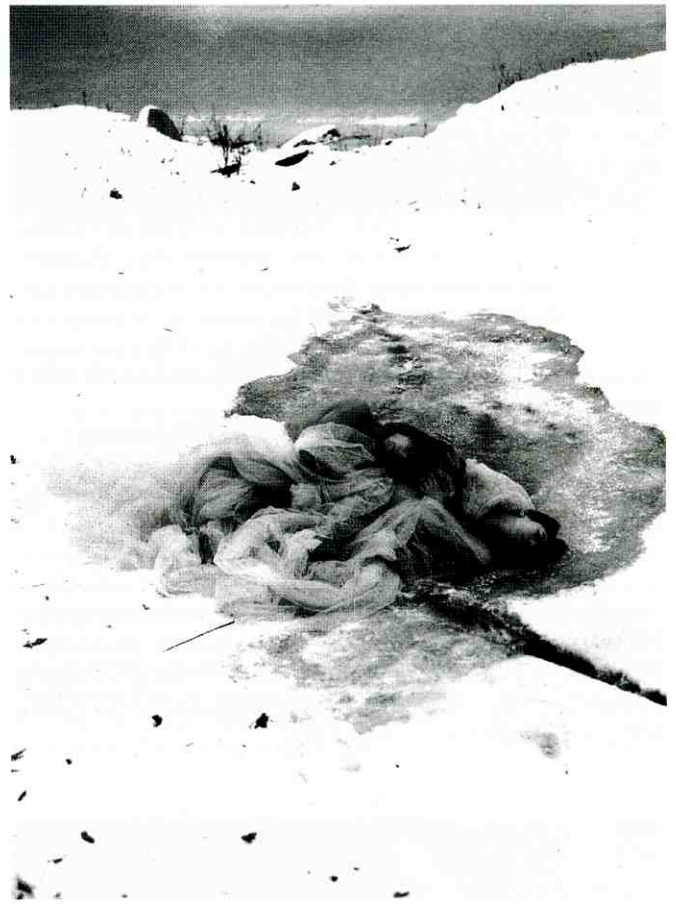
Eiko & Koma, 1992. Photograph: © Philip Trager.



Eiko & Koma surmise that we have a collective genetic memory, which is the result of an evolutionary process and separate from our acquired memories and visual vocabularies. Their images are meant to evoke recollections of this collective past and, with them, emotions that feel familiar, though are not fully understood. As an example, in the 1997 live presentation *River*, they embrace each other in very cold water. As they slowly rise out of the water and break away from each other, the layer of warmth between their bodies turns into a puff of steam in the chilly air. While explicable in scientific terms, the image suggests the innate fragility of humankind, struggling against the wild and unpredictable turns of nature. By creating this nonverbal dialogue with the viewer, Eiko & Koma are in effect adding both narrative and emotional layers to the installation.

The settings in which Eiko & Koma perform are evocative of both learned and remembered places. By using organic materials such as earth, leaves, water, and snow, they recall natural landscapes, and their environments often retain associative smells and sounds. The placement of lighting is equally important, since the angle, intensity, and colors of light define the shapes and allusions created both by the set materials and by Eiko & Koma themselves. It is light that gives their curved bodies and molded natural debris line and form—and mood. Just as the afternoon sun and the setting sun create different atmospheres, artificial lighting can determine the mood of the environment and affect the movements of the performers. In *Breath*, the lighting is mottled, as if streaming through foliage and trees onto a forest floor. And it is the mysteriousness of this half-shadowy, half-illuminated world that heightens the emotional impact of Eiko & Koma's imagery.

The installation form differs from a theatrical presentation in another significant way: in the spatial relationship of the viewer to the performer. In an installation, the viewer can see the work from different perspectives and physical positions, from standing to seated, a freedom that promotes multiple readings of the same event. With this in mind as they prepared *Breath*, Eiko & Koma videotaped fragments of their bodies in motion from multiple perspectives. Through video projection in the installation, the images are enlarged to macroscopic proportions so that, instead of body sections, they suggest the rise and fall of mountains or dunes. Just



*Eiko & Koma*, 1992. Photograph: © Philip Trager.

as the retardation and acceleration of their movements change our perceptions of time, this abstraction of the human form through fragmentation and enlargement heightens our awareness of the body's resemblance to other natural forms.

By altering our sense of time and place, Eiko & Koma ultimately alter our sense of being. As we participate in their work, our minds readjust from the speed and chaos of the real world to more reflective states of consciousness, to new perceptions of the subtle movements and nuances that make up our lives.

**Matthew Yokobosky**

Associate Curator, Film and Video



## Biography

Eiko was born in Tokyo, Japan, in 1952. She studied law and political science at Chuyo University, Tokyo (1970–72). Koma, born in Niigata, Japan, in 1948, also studied law and political science, at Waseda University, Tokyo (1967–70). In 1971, both studied with avant-garde theatrical movement pioneers Tatsumi Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno in Tokyo. The following year, they studied in Hannover, Germany, with Manja Chimiel, a disciple of Bauhaus "Neue Tanz" pioneer Mary Wigman. Over the next several years, they began to choreograph and perform their own works, and traveled throughout the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Tunisia. In 1976 they moved permanently to the United States. For over twenty-five years they have had an exclusive collaboration.

Eiko & Koma have received grants and fellowships from, among others, the National Endowment for the Arts (1982–98); the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation (1984); the Japan Foundation (1990–91, 1995–97); The Harkness Foundation for Dance (1990, 1991–97); Joyce Mertz-Gilmore Foundation (1991, 1994–95); The Rockefeller Foundation (1991–92, 1994–97); Lila Acheson Wallace Theater Fund (1993–99); the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Fellowship (1996–2001); Chase Manhattan Foundation (1997); and Philip Morris Companies (1997). Eiko & Koma live and work in New York.

## Selected Performances

All choreography and set designs are by Eiko & Koma unless otherwise specified. All works have traveled.

- The Japan Society, New York, "White Dance: Moth," 1976.  
The Performing Garage, New York, "Fluttering Black," 1979.  
Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art, "Entropy" (part III of *Trilogy*), 1981.  
American Dance Festival, Durham, North Carolina, "Elegy" (commission for their 50th anniversary season), 1984.  
Dance Umbrella, Cambridge, Massachusetts, "By the River" (original title "Eye Below"), 1986. Film decor by David Geary.  
Brooklyn Academy of Music, New York, "Tree," 1988.  
Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, "Canal," 1989. Film decor by David Geary.  
Museum of Contemporary Art, Hiroshima, Japan, "Land," 1991. Scenery by Sandra Lerner.  
The Joyce Theater, New York, "Wind," 1993.  
Delaware River, Easton, Pennsylvania, "River" (outdoor version; presented by Lafayette College), 1995. Collaboration with visual artist Judd Weisberg and filmmaker James Byrne.  
Brooklyn Academy of Music, New York, "River" (stage version), 1997. Collaboration with the Kronos Quartet.  
The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Washington, D.C., "Pulse," 1998.

## Selected Videography

All works are video, color and sound, unless otherwise noted.

- Tentacle*, 1983. 7 minutes. Produced in collaboration with Jeff Bush and Celia Ipiotis.  
*Wallow*, 1984. Silent. 19 minutes. Based on the stage work *Fur Seal*, 1977.  
*Bone Dream*, 1985. Black-and-white. 7 minutes. Videotaped in collaboration with Jeff Bush and Celia Ipiotis.  
*Lament*, 1986. Black-and-white. 10 minutes. Collaboration with James Byrne. Commissioned by the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.  
*Husk*, 1987.  
*Undertow*, 1988. Black-and-white. 7 minutes. Collaboration with James Byrne.

## Bibliography

- Anderson, Jack. "Eiko and Koma Slow Time Down." *The New York Times*, December 7, 1986, sect. 2, p. 10.  
\_\_\_\_\_. "Eiko and Koma: Life in the Slow Lane." *The New York Times*, April 1, 1990, sect. 2, pp. 6, 8.  
Dunning, Jennifer. "A Nuanced Production with Nature as Co-Star." *The New York Times*, September 11, 1995, p. C11.  
Jowitt, Deborah. "Eiko and Koma." *The Village Voice*, December 23, 1997, p. 103.  
Windham, Leslie. "A Conversation with Eiko & Koma." *Ballet Review* 16 (Summer 1988), pp. 47–59.

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## Conversation on Art

Tuesday, June 16, 7 pm

Eiko & Koma join Whitney associate curator Matthew Yokobosky in an informal discussion about their installation at the Whitney and the range of their theatrical works.

Admission: \$8; members, senior citizens, and students with ID \$6. For ticket availability or to order tickets by mail, call (212) 570-7722. Whitney Museum Members may purchase tickets with a credit card by calling (212) 570-7710.

This program is made possible by The Joe and Emily Lowe Foundation.

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Whitney Museum of American Art  
945 Madison Avenue at 75th Street  
New York, NY 10021

Hours: Wednesday 11 am–6 pm  
Thursday 1 pm–8 pm  
Friday–Sunday 11 am–6 pm

Film and Video Information: (212) 570-3676