

## Eiko & Koma

Eiko, Japanese, b. 1952; Koma, Japanese, b. 1948

-- Commissions

Canal (1989), Wind (1993), River (1995), Offering (2002; indoor version, world premiere)

-- Performances

White Dance (1981), Grain (1984), Canal (1989), Land; Wind (1993), River (1996), Offering (2002; indoor version, world premiere), Snow (2003)

-- Residencies

1989, 1993, 1996, 2003

Simultaneously ancient and modern, shamanistic and deeply organic, the performance world Eiko & Koma inhabit is primordial in its expression; time acts almost as a silent third member of the duo. Their brand of movement theater executes choreography at a glacial pace that carries within it the potential to change the experience and perception of time itself.

Born and raised in Japan, the artists create works informed by the politics and global cultural movements of the 1960s as well as the democratic and community aspects of life in America (the couple's adopted home since 1976). Their early but major influences were the teachings of Tatsumi Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno, two founders and masters of *butoh*, the radical postwar Japanese dance-theater form. Also evident in their work are elements of *Neue Tanz*, the German modern dance movement of the 1970s, and other forms of German Expressionism that heavily shaped *butoh*'s conception.

Drawing their power from Zen Buddhism<sup>1</sup> and its interrelated properties of nature, silence, repose, and the human body, Eiko & Koma populate their own works, using the tools of duration and process as guideposts. Each intricately crafted moment is heavy with the weight of meditation, yet conveys buoyancy in the delicacy of its execution. Simplicity, openness, the integrity of organic materials, and a sense of existential confrontation are their long-standing hallmarks.

At a time of expanding global influences in the national dance landscape, *White Dance* (1976; their first work) was performed as part of the Walker Art Center's *New Dance USA* festival in 1981.<sup>2</sup> In separate Walker engagements during the following fifteen years, Eiko & Koma presented the *Environmental Trilogy*: *Land*, *Wind*, and *River*. Cited as the launch point of their dedication to site-specific work, *River* took place not onstage, but in the waters of Medicine Lake in Plymouth, Minnesota. The piece provided a direct connection to nature as well as to a broader-based audience within the regional park and recreation area whom the artists hoped would happen upon the performance. They performed the work at dusk with a resolute sense of humility and inclusiveness that gathered the community together to explore the incontrovertible bonds between art and the environment.<sup>3</sup>

In part as a response to September 11, 2001, the ritualistic work *Offering* (2002) was created for performances on a plaza overlooking the Hudson River in New York City, near the World Trade Center site.<sup>4</sup> A work of beauty, pain, and healing, *Offering* attempts

to sanctify a desecrated space. With this "transportable dance or living site-installation," the artists "hope to offer audiences the solace that they personally receive from nature's eternal rhythms—in which movement and stillness, life and death are but a breath apart. They aspire to bring a glimpse of the breathing universe into our wounded urban landscape."<sup>5</sup> The indoor version<sup>6</sup> of *Offering* opened with the performers emerging from within the theater's crumbling proscenium arch toward an icon not unlike a funeral pyre. The exquisite grace they created from the abstraction of their bodies seemed to channel the collective sadness of tragedies past. A lament, yes, but more a reminder of the revelatory power of hope and unity.

P.B.

Notes

1. For a detailed explanation of the importance of Zen philosophy to Eiko & Koma's work, see Suzanne Carbonneau, "The Weight of History, the Lightness of the Universe," Festival Program (Lewiston, Maine: Bates Dance Festival, 2002).
2. Although non-Western dance forms had long been assimilated, process methods and specific cultural philosophies were becoming more visible in American choreography.
3. Eiko on *River*: "We were guests of the river, and grateful for the beauty and pleasure we were allowed to share. Nor were these and we the only guests. Bats, insects, wind, moon, mist, children, geese, and fisherman were there before and after. . . . Even things that would normally be distractions in the theater became part of the scenery, for which we can take neither blame nor credit. . . . Rowboats drifted by and voices whispering in wonderment did not interrupt these dreams. Such inclusiveness is a joy." Excerpt from Eiko's essay on the artists' Web site, <http://www.eikoandkoma.org/ekriverenv.html>.
4. Beginning with *River*, the two have often produced separate but parallel indoor versions of each outdoor work.
5. Eiko & Koma, excerpt from the artists' Web site, <http://www.eikoandkoma.org/ekoffering.html>.
6. The Walker commissioned and held the world premiere of the indoor version of *Offering* as part of its 2003 *Out There* Festival, copresented with the Southern Theater, Minneapolis.



Eiko & Koma *River* Medicine Lake at French Regional Park in Plymouth, Minnesota, 1996