

Interview on Dance USA . Nov 2005.

Eiko and Koma were law and political science students in Japan when they each joined the Tatum Hijioka company in 1971. This encounter led to a collaboration that has broken numerous boundaries in the art of dance. The two are renowned for creating a unique and riveting theater of movement out of stillness, shape, light, and sound. In 1996, Eiko & Koma were named MacArthur Fellows, the first time in the program's 15-year history that a fellowship was awarded to collaborators. Their newest project, *Cambodian Stories*, is a multi-disciplinary, cross-generational collaboration with ten young artists who study and work at the Reyum Institute of Arts and Culture in Phnom Penh. In addition to the young artists, the project's creative collaborators include composer Sam-Ang Sam and Reyum Institute founder Daravuth Ly, who will function as the dramaturge. Eiko spoke with the Journal about their new project and how it connects to their lifetime of work.

I understand you and Koma started performing without formal dancing training. How did that come about?

We did take classes in Japan, but were not training specifically to be dancers. Our two dance teachers were non-mainstream, and our relationship with them was not one of technique but of mind, experiences, and experiments. One of them actually put us on stage quite early. He told us "You do not necessarily learn dance technique, but rather a stance—a manner, a feel—just by performing." The other teacher taught only improvisation classes. Because of this, we were not bound to any modern dance technique. The technique you have learned tends to have a way of residing in your body even when you do not particularly want it. When you watch dancers, you can tell who comes from what tradition; it is sometimes hard to get out of a tradition in which you've been trained. During that year or two when we took a lot of classes, we also gave many very small-scale performances, and this taught us adaptability and a taste for experiment.

How would you characterize your work up to this time?

It is related to ways of living in the postwar Japan Koma and I grew up in. Living in the US and remembering our childhood, we are aesthetically attracted to the close relationship of the body to the floor—you are eating on the floor, sleeping on the floor. You stand up to go somewhere, but you are usually pretty close to the floor. We lived not always vertical but often horizontal to the floor. In the same way, you have a relationship to the dirt in the field. You are closer to the dirt. Our coming from that kind of life, affects our aesthetic and the ways we see things,. Because Koma and I are both Japanese of a similar age, and because we don't use American dance technique of any particular school—we pretty much use our own—we don't look like or feel like

dancers who come from the studio and we have never wanted to look like them. Instead we are every man, every woman and every being, We usually create an environment first, and within that environment we can become something that is other than human. In *Cambodian Stories*, we are working with young artists, but the sense of inclusiveness, of the body being included in the landscape, is still a very important element— the way you stand, the way you look, the way you move, the way you relate to other bodies.

And these young collaborators are painters who paint big pictures on the floor of the stage during each performance. That, itself, is a very authentic movement, where the body becomes a “body working,” a body that is moving to do something, not to express something. Instead of putting the pause and the movement together to make an expression, you are using your body to create something tangible. But it’s not like bringing somebody in from the street. We are training the young painters to be aware that they are being seen by the audience. We want them to know that action of painting is as beautiful as are paintings themselves. The element of the performance is very much there; they are sharing, physically and mentally their collective work with audiences. It’s not a modern dance, choreographed by an individual and performed by trained dancers.. In this sense, I think where we started with this piece is very close to where we wanted to go.

How is this new work a continuation— or a variation— of what preceded it?

Every work Koma and I make tends to be in a continuum with our previous work. It seems like even though *Cambodian Stories* is radically different in the number of performers (ten), and who they are (not professional performing artists, even though quite accomplished painters), still some of the things that are very important to us will find a way into the piece, such as the body as part of the landscape and the landscape— even the buildings and man-made things— as part of the natural world, and the way that landscape gives way to time, how things rot, break down, and die over time. But by virtue of the fact that young people dominate on the stage, this work will be very different. Usually it’s just two of us, or one of us as a part of an evening, but this time it will be a lot of them, and they’re very young. Koma is 56 and I am 53, so we not only carry our age, but our experiences as performer onstage. Young people, even though they are very good at what they do, don’t have that. It’s very new to them, very fresh; their bodies are very young. It’s a big difference.

Could you say a little about how you perceive the role of the arts in Cambodian life, particularly as compared to the role of the arts in the U.S.?

I can’t make a general statement about Cambodia because urban life and rural life in Cambodia are different. Here or in Japan, whether you’re in the city or the country, you’re basically looking

at same TV programs and eating the same food from the refrigerator. In Cambodia, people are more locally bound and TV or other electrical gadgets do not dominate every household. In the performing arts in Cambodia, because the culture was so attacked and violated during Pol Pot's regime, much energy has been spent to recover what was violently lost. There is a big effort in training traditional dancers, not only from the government and educators and traditional artists, but from the ordinary people themselves. They miss the culture that they had had. Therefore the focus, understandably, has been on recovering traditional work and not on encouraging new contemporary work. What we have performed in Cambodia, and what we are now doing with the young people, is quite new and strange to them. However, the people we are working with, the young students we encountered in a number of open rehearsals, they're really accepting. They may not know how to put the work in context, but they seem to be quite straight in the way they watch. It's new to them, yet somehow—and this may just be my wishful view—they seem to be connecting. We also invited people from the Royal Academy and other artists, some of them older generations, and they said this is very new, yet this is very Asian. I hope this statement comes from the fact that we are closely working with young Cambodians, and we are not imposing on them, and fact that Koma and I are Asian even though we come from a different country.

And the young Cambodians you are working with?

Those young artists are able to grow and make themselves live in a different world, -- so they're very eager to learn. It's quite moving the way they work. They also have fun. We are doing serious art, but they take pleasure in it. In solving problems and investigating new ways. It's not like one person is better than the other because it's not that kind of skill we deal with. It's very communal. The beauty comes from their working together. And there is another element: In Cambodia, there are many temples and in the temples there are many paintings. These young Cambodians have those traditional paintings in their culture, in their bodies, in their training and ways of seeing and drawing. They are looking at the shape of the body, the movement of the body, from the painter's point of view and that has been so for many generations of painters. So I sometimes think, -- if there is one 17 year old doing this movement, but inside her are many painters and paintings—it's a very wonderful sense of layers, breaths, and voices. It's an interesting mix between being so young and fresh, but also coming from those layers of people seeing and painting, watching and painting. But what really moves us is that those young people are hopeful— they do not compare their countries to other places and mourn. They're young, and they have every birthright to be hopeful, even though their situation is very difficult. They have amazing energy to work and play and that energy is beautiful It is not that they are more beautiful than people in other countries but young people's natural beauty looks more

striking in a country so wounded. It's like looking at a young flower bloom in a field that is less than favorable. It's very moving to see them smile against the odds.

Can you speak to the role that some of your long-time presenters have had in the development of your work and career?

As you know there are many producers in the field that I have known and have worked with for years, and now there are new people, too. There's a wonderful mutual trust that made this new work possible, because when we first started it was very dangerous for us to think those painters could indeed perform. We did not quite know what kind of work we could come up with involving Cambodian young painters. It is the same as when we start any piece, but this time, it' was even more unknown territory--. *Cambodian Stories* is a very large-scale work. But the presenters have basically trusted us and booked their dates long before we started an actual rehearsal process. I think one reason of course, is our working history. Even the presenters who are new to us know something about our work since we've been around for some time. But it's not just about Koma and me. I think the presenters are taking this occasion to learn, to feel closer to these people from Cambodia. Americans of a certain age are aware of what's been going on in Cambodia. It is a country whose recent history was deeply affected by America and in turn Cambodia's history and outcome have deep significance for Americans. And I would think that deep feelings about the matters in Cambodia would play some role for the audience as well. For that reason, the potential audience may not be kind of people who readily come to a dance concert, especially a contemporary dance concert. Also, this piece is very, very visual— kind of action painting visual— so it may attract people in the visual arts field as well as younger people who may not know anything about dance history or about us but are approaching this collaboration from their own point of view as a generation. There are different layers of potential interest, and I'm very grateful that those presenters are interested, supportive, curious, and sensitive. They make our work possible.