

## Eiko and Koma Pity the Earth

Two dancers and a pianist create a transcendent lament

by Deborah Jowitt

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The Japan Society's ongoing celebration, "Turning Japanese," included a three-week mini-festival, "Kazuo Ohno 101," in which butoh artists honored not only the Japan Society's centennial but the 101st birthday of Ohno, a founder of butoh, on October 27. The "101" also designates the festival as a crash course in the radical postwar art form.

Eiko and Koma, who first presented work at the Japan Society in 1976 and have been part of the American dance scene ever since, studied with Ohno but don't identify themselves as butoh artists. They more profoundly identify themselves with nature and with humans' relationships to other creatures and the earth that

nourishes them. In their spare, slow-moving pieces, they may resemble rocks rolling together at a glacial pace or branches adrift in a stream. But even as they burrow into soil or merge with a tree, they're always a woman and a man.

In honoring Ohno and the Japan Society, the pair collaborated on *Mourning* with the remarkable avant-garde pianist Margaret Leng Tan. The notes by John Cage, Bunita Marcus, or Somei Satoh that she plucks from a piano's prepared strings or summons from its keys, the tinkling tones of a toy piano that she also plays, fall into long silences. Whether the sounds are as delicate as dripping water or crash like an avalanche (she slams her whole forearm down on the keyboard), they convey the tremulousness of the environment in which the two dancers struggle. The title expresses a theme that runs through all their work: They mourn human cruelty, human destructiveness.

Eiko and Koma lie separate and motionless on a soil-covered stage while the audience is gathering. Behind them hangs a "tree" of autumn leaves that David Ferri's brilliant lighting sometimes transforms into foliage against a red sky. Rolling together is a monumental task; standing, almost impossible. In their crude mossy tunics, with leaves in their hair and dirt on their faces, inching along on their bellies with no help from their arms, they look like wounded seals; nuzzling the air, they even seem blind. Koma shoves Eiko toward the tree with his head; she lurches to land on top of him. You can't tell whether they want to mate or eat each other. Once, when she lies motionless, he whips and scrubs her with a piece of cloth. Once, she utters a terrible cry. Once, he plunges headfirst off the stage and later clambers back, almost hidden under a load of branches with which he engulfs the two of them. In the end, only their bare legs are visible, wavering up from a pile of leaves like new plants seeking the light.



**Eiko and Koma**

photo: Jaroslaw Brzezinski

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Japan Society

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