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Evoking the Delicacy of Life in a Subtle Dance of Death

By [JACK ANDERSON](#)

For presentations by the Danspace Project at St. Mark's Church, all religious artifacts are removed from the sanctuary and what remains is an open space for movement. Nevertheless, this bare sanctuary still seemed a holy place on Thursday night when the dancers and choreographers known as Eiko and Koma performed "Death Poem."

When theatergoers entered the church, they were confronted by an enormous painting of a woman in water who recalled the drowning Ophelia.

Stepping around this canvas, a collaborative effort by the Reyum Painting Collective from the Reyum Institute of Arts and Culture in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, spectators gathered in the sanctuary for a slow and dignified dance about dying - and about the breath of life, as well.

Eiko was stretched motionless on a mound in the center of the space with a veil suspended above her. But no, she wasn't motionless. Nothing was. The veil trembled slightly in the air. And looking closely, you could see that Eiko moved, almost imperceptibly. She raised a hand; she turned her head. A recording by the Kronos Quartet of John Dowland's melancholy "Lachrymae Antiquae" of 1604 gave way to silence. But no, it wasn't silence. You could hear traffic outside and what sounded like a recording of cricket chirps.

From time to time, Koma, dressed in priestly robes, solemnly trudged about the space and left. Eiko tried to lift herself up, and her mouth opened as if to form words, yet none were audible. She rolled laboriously from side to side and struggled to reach the altar steps to a recording of Hildegard von Bingen's 12th-century "O Virtus Sapientie" and a repetition of the Dowland. The painting of the woman glided into the space, pulled forward with the aid of wires.

Both Eiko and Koma sank to the ground. Yet, again, no one remained totally motionless. Stirring feebly as if seeking to touch each other, these people appeared to hover forever between living and dying, and this dance about death became a poignant reminder of how frail and precious life can be.

Eiko and Koma's "Death Poem" continues through tomorrow night at St. Mark's Church, Second Avenue at 10th Street, (212) 674-8194.