

## EIKO & KOMA: THE STAGE AS A CUTTING BOARD

*When we perform we like to imagine that each of us is a fresh fish which was just caught and is on the cutting board. The fish intuits that somebody will eat it. No room to be coquettish. The fish's body is tight, shining blue, eyes wide open. No way to escape.*

The audience sits on cushions and chairs that line three sides of the white marble floored, white walled, rotunda of the San Francisco Museum of Art. As they wait, a young woman appears with a bag of flour which she sprinkles close to the first row of sitters making a powdery demarcation of the performing area.

At the rear of the room, suspended from wires attached to the high vaulted ceiling is a huge screen with white cloth stretched across its 30 foot width on which the words "No Wave" have been painted in large, brush stroked black lettering. Two performers, a man and a woman, walk across the designated stage area and stand at either side of the sign. They are dressed in black; streetworn pants and shirts. Each is blindfolded, their eyes covered by a strip of black cloth.

*Our choreography is nothing more than patchwork and we are sneak thieves. But as we keep wearing them, even patched clothes become suitable to our bodies. We love the illusion that we wear our patches so well that nobody can see the cloth separating from us. Inevitably clothes become tired and miserable while, at the same time, our bodies become old at a different speed. When the cloth gets to be disturbing we throw it away. Patching the next piece, we also have to gather some tricks as performers. With one action, or one smile, the choreography must, momentarily, disappear.*

The word painted screen forming a background, the two performers stand in a way that is both limp and expectant. They look like the newspaper pictures of Iranian firing squad victims frozen by the camera in a final posture of resigned passivity. Over the loudspeakers come the electronically mixed sounds of thunder and carnival music which repeats itself in short cycles briefly interrupting the silence like an ominous litany.

*Our work is not choreography borrowed from others, or that we can lend to others to perform. It is, instead, simply the dance which exists on stage and we, as well as the audience, are witnesses to what takes place. The form is just a recipe, as if we were cooks. It is there to be adjusted. For what we want is to create a dish of a kind people have never yet tasted. We try to avoid fancy recipes or over-cooking as we absolutely don't want those who have come to admire our hard kitchen work. We would like to present our bodies as raw and spontaneous.*

Separately the pair begins to move slowly forward; their hands like quivering fish explore the space before them. Then, released from a skylight, an enormous piece of black material unfolds downward. Partially obscuring the screen, the cloth begins to slowly undulate moved by the warm air. Simultaneously, the performers, still blindfolded, reach the perimeter of the performing space. Feeling the flour barrier with their bare feet, they bend down, touch the flour and then their blindfolds leaving a white streak on the black binding which looks like a caste marking or a smear of Christian ash.

*We hate symmetrical movements. We cannot stand it when two steps are measure against two steps. There won't be much pleasure if both legs weigh the same. When we move forward it is as if somebody was grabbing us from the back, as if our right sides were landsliding—the heart must be quiet to listen to that sound. Our bodies are most*

*unreasonable toys which often betray us; which laugh at the pretention that we stand at the edge of a cliff.*

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The statements are by performers Eiko Otake and Koma Yamada. The work described is the beginning of a performance piece they created for the Noguchi exhibit in San Francisco, August 1979. Using material from FLUTTERING BLACK premiered the month before in New York and done there with the accompaniment of live New Wave music, the work takes its initial visual inspiration from the black flag of anarchism and its artistic impulse from an “acknowledgement,” say Eiko and Koma, “of the last summer of the 1970s.”

From Japan, but for the past two years residents of the United States, Eiko and Koma call themselves dancers. However their work, all of their own conception, is not traditionally choreographic but falls, instead, into an idiomatic, hybrid theater/dance genre. Although their pieces are almost entirely non-verbal, Eiko and Koma’s primary focus is not, as is most dance, the exploration or extension of physicality. What interests them, and what they try to portray, is that dark area that separates what can be said with language and the kinetic expressions and abstractions of movement.

Eluding both simile and allegory, it’s the area of visceral recognition evoked by the German philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein when he, in his Philosophical Investigations, challenges his readers to “describe the aroma of coffee.” Wittgenstein’s example may seem trivial, but by projection it affirms the existence of a realm of experiential or intuitive knowledge, a realm including that for which there are no

adequate symbolic substitutions such as, for instance, our awareness of the “feel” of breathing.

It’s this existential endeavor—giving form to the inexpressible—that threads through Eiko and Koma’s “dances,” and along the way, some intriguing conceptual hurdles are created for both performers and audience. Eiko and Koma’s work can, for example, have disarmingly literal aspects as in *FUR SEAL* (1977) where Eiko, costumed in the seal lining of an old coat and Koma, bare-chested, in a waist to thigh strip of seal skin, seem, as they grunt, slither and hiss their way around the stage, to be attempting little more than imitation. But at some indefinable point in the work it becomes clear that their humanness has never been relinquished; that we are being drawn in the company of weighted blubber on bone, of stinking fish breath, to be told an ineffable but human something about the pleasurable and painful compulsions of instinct; that we are being told something about a world without mind.

Neither Eiko or Koma have studied traditional Japanese theater or dance forms. Indeed, their teacher in Japan, Hijikata had, in the post First World War years of Euro/Japanese cultural cross fertilization, been strongly influenced by the romantic aura surrounding the divinely mad Nijinsky as well as by the intellectual clarity of German Expressionist dance epitomized by Mary Wigman. Nijinsky left little room for emulation, but the roots of German dramatic dance could be explored and on first leaving Japan, Eiko and Koma traveled to Hamburg where they studied with Wigman disciple Manja Chmiel before setting out on their own to perform in Europe, North Africa and finally America.

Eiko and Koma use kimonos in only one of their early pieces, *WHITE DANCE; MOTH*, given its American premiere in 1976, but, of course, the Japanese elements of their work extends beyond the choice of costume. These elements might include their pacing which, for some, seems abusively slow; a fondness for contorted limbs and features as well as for self-directed violence such as demonstrations of hair flailing dementia; whopping fist to chest; or slamming their bodies to the floor. In addition, having spent most of their careers performing for Western audiences, they occasionally lean on their exoticness for effect.

The balance, however, is on the debit side. For in their intense performances, in which they generally perform one hour long piece, Eiko and Koma carry their audiences through breathtakingly precarious shifts of mood and juxtapositions of style that can lead to an equally breathtaking stew of pathos, absurdity, and beauty. Take, for example, a moment late in *WHITE DANCE; MOTH* when, after firmly establishing a somber aura of fragility and death, a kimonoed Koma hoists a burlap bag to his shoulder and proceeds to fill the stage with the thud of a hundred pounds of ordinary, very genuine, potatoes. As the audience reacts with nervous laughter Eiko proceeds to wade her way through the brown lumps with a poignant eloquence and this, despite the incongruity of the scenery, quietly pulls those watching back into the piece.

In a different guise, this same device appears in *BEFORE THE COCK CROWS* (1978). Making thematic use of the biblical parable of betrayal, Eiko and Koma perform in Near Eastern costumes to Near Eastern music evoking some remote time and place as they explore the gestural textures of self-absorption, decadence, and deception. But just as everything seems firmly shrouded in lulling obscurity, Eiko forms her fingers into the

shape of a very contemporary gun and, aiming her digits at the already prostrate Koma, she commits the coup de grace with the loud shout of “bang, bang, bang.”

With these works, and with their latest piece FISSION (1979)—where they appear with their bodies covered in wet flour paste which dries and cracks as they move to Andean folk songs—Eiko and Koma make an almost Brechtian, alienating, use of their startling visual conjunctions. Like Brecht, Eiko and Koma show no interest in providing an opportunity for empathetic reveries. They prefer, it seems, that their viewers feel edgily out-of-kilter. The audience, expecting dinner, finds the fish still on the cutting board. The audience, expecting a report of the journey, finds it is still in progress.