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APRIL 2006

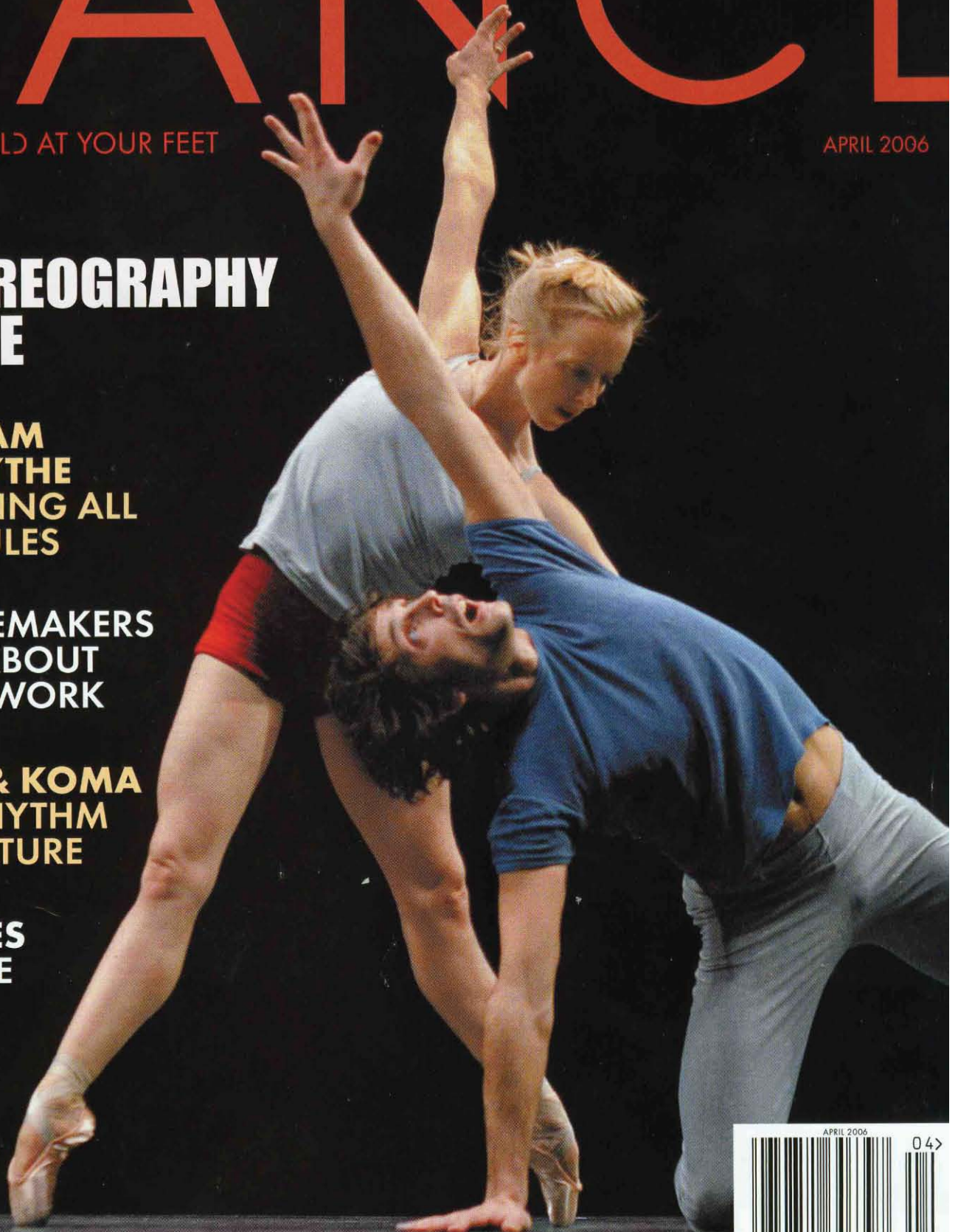
THE CHOREOGRAPHY ISSUE

**WILLIAM
FORSYTHE**
BREAKING ALL
THE RULES

DANCEMAKERS
TALK ABOUT
THEIR WORK

EIKO & KOMA
THE RHYTHM
OF NATURE

PILATES
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MAT



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Eiko & Koma in *Offering*, a portable work developed after 9/11. The piece creates a "place where people share their sense of mourning."



Photo: Courtesy Eiko & Koma

DANCING IN TUNE WITH THE EARTH

BY DEBORAH JOWITT

Eiko & Koma take *Cambodian Stories* on their latest tour.

It's a breezy night in late May 2004. People are still gathering at the gate of New York's St. Mark's Church in the Bowery, hoping to grab a chair or a cushion on the ground for Eiko & Koma's free performance in the churchyard. Some have been following this duo's career since the two arrived here from Japan in the 1970s; others are clearly first-time viewers.

When Eiko & Koma, their limbs and faces white-painted, have been lying motionless in the dirt for at least 20 minutes, a waiting spectator whips out a cell phone and urges a friend to hurry over and see this event, which he struggles to define: "It's not 'we're gonna dance'—like *dance* dance." For sure.

When the performer-choreographers first showed up in New York in 1976, presenting their *White Dance*, they were a shocking, mesmerizing anomaly. Americans hadn't yet been exposed to *butoh*, or we might have linked their work to that radical postwar Japanese dance form. But who among us had ever seen barely moving dancers clad in what looked like ashen, peeling skin, their feet turned in, their eyes staring into dark distances (*Trilogy*, 1979–81)? Or watched a willowy young woman sway sinuously with myriad Q-tips stuck through her hair (*Before the Cock Crows*, 1978)?

During their early years in America, the pair had to identi-

fy themselves in programs as "Eiko (female)" and "Koma (male)." Today, after nearly 30 years as U.S. residents, touring here and abroad, conducting their "Delicious Movement Workshops," receiving honors (a Guggenheim Fellowship, two Bessies, a MacArthur Fellowship, and the Samuel Scripps Award), they are a known quantity—not categorized as modern dance, postmodern dance, or *butoh*—just two unique and powerful artists.

They were unorthodox from the beginning. Enrolled in different Tokyo universities as political science majors, they found their way separately to the studio of *butoh* innovator Tatsumi Hijikata in 1971, seeking respite from the chaos, violence, and endless discussions that marked the student activism of the late 1960s in Japan. But they never became part of Hijikata's inner circle of disciples, nor did they cleave for long to *butoh* co-founder Kazuo Ohno. They also felt like outsiders in the ballet and modern dance classes that they took while knocking around Europe, performing where they could. Luckily, they came under the wing of Manja Chmiel, a former assistant to German *Ausdruckstanz* pioneer Mary Wigman, who urged them to forget about solo careers and continue to develop work as a team.

They took her advice, collaborating only with lighting designers and composers, except in rare instances (they invited their friend Anna Halprin, West Coast guru of postmodern dance, then 81, to participate in the 2001 *Be With*, and their two sons Yuta and Shin appeared in certain pieces when they were little).

A work by Eiko & Koma may unspool at a glacial pace over a hour. Cause and effect are often ephemeral. You can't be sure, say, that Eiko is reaching toward Koma, only that she is very gradually unfolding her arm. Imagine watching a fern push up through the earth via time-lapse photography, or ice melting into water. Some spectators, unable or unwilling to abandon their expectations about performance, may walk out. The choreographers accept that with equanimity.

The two-and-a-half years in the early 1980s that they spent in a derelict farmhouse in the Catskills fostered their slowed-down sense of time and honed their perception of man as a part of nature. Not, as Koma once put it, that they tried to "[make] a tree dance...or move like a flower;" but to understand "how we could be right by [a] flower or how I could be right by [a] tree without disturbing them." *Snow* (1999), *River* (1995), *Wind* (1993), *Tree* (1988)...these dances, like their titles, evoke elemental forces. The performers blend with, grow into, the environments that they painstakingly build or find. Twisting, burrowing, splaying, their bodies and limbs suggest both primal humanity and non-human forms. In *Night Tide* (1984), their curled, naked torsos roll slowly, slowly toward each other, as if under the influence of mysterious planetary forces, to touch briefly and collapse. Humans mating. Stones taking aeons to wash up on a beach. In some works, they struggle to achieve together some simple task, like rising. In others, they are unutterably alone, as in the 1984 *Elegy*, when they stand naked and wilting in separate shallow pools of dark water.

Below: Eiko & Koma perform *Offering* in Cambodia

Right above: *The Caravan Project*

Right, below: in *Death Poem*

They dance slow but talk fast. When I sit with them in their New York apartment to speak about their recent and current projects, the words tumble out as they laugh, argue, and finish each other's sentences. They've been developing free performances since 1995, beginning with *River*. Spectators assemble along a riverbank, and the two performers float downstream, tangling with branches and each other, eventually drifting out of sight. In their 1998 installation *Breath*, they set up an environment with video in a small space in the Whitney Museum and occupied it for four weeks, seven hours a day (with breaks).

The Caravan Project (initiated in 1999) involves hauling a trailer that opens on four sides to form a small "stage." Spectators at the chosen site can walk around the trailer to study the effect of changing angles and light. The project involves collaborating with savvy parks department officials and presenters in various cities. Says Eiko, "If we were in downtown Chicago, we'd perform for three hours because people come and go. In Tompkins Square [New York], we performed for one hour, because that's a pretty artsy audience."

9/11 reinforced their urge to bring people together for free performances. In 2000, they had been given 12 months of studio space on the 92nd floor of the World Trade Center's North Tower. Says Eiko of the portable *Offering* (2002), "The whole idea is to create a place where people share their sense of mourning."

Public spaces are not the only places where Eiko & Koma may be seen gratis. They have adapted pieces for short performances in senior citizens' centers (where they neither dance naked nor wear white makeup: "We need to be quite well-dressed in those places and we need to kind of look beautiful," Eiko jokes). This past fall, in a ward for seriously ill

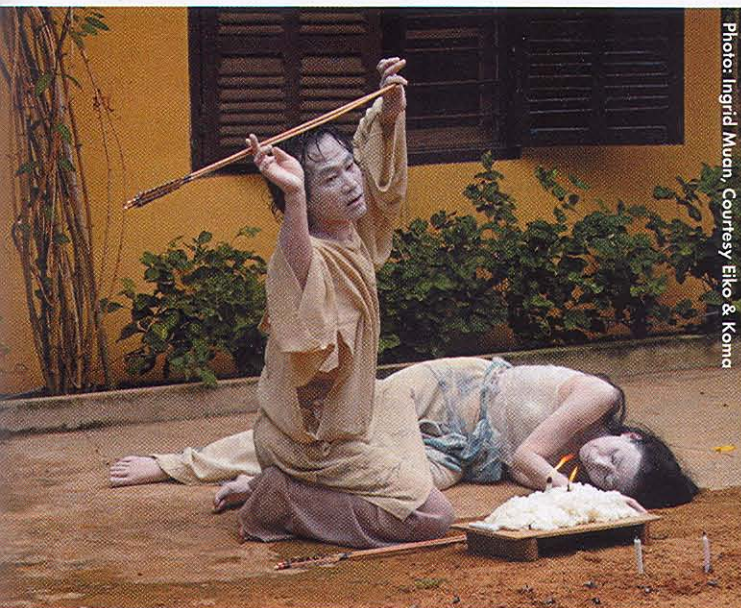


Photo: Ingrid Muen, Courtesy Eiko & Koma



Photo: Eiko & Koma, Courtesy Eiko & Koma

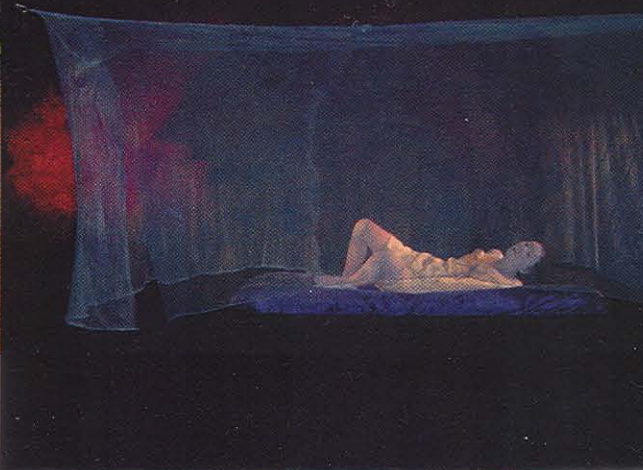


Photo: David Ferri, Courtesy Eiko & Koma

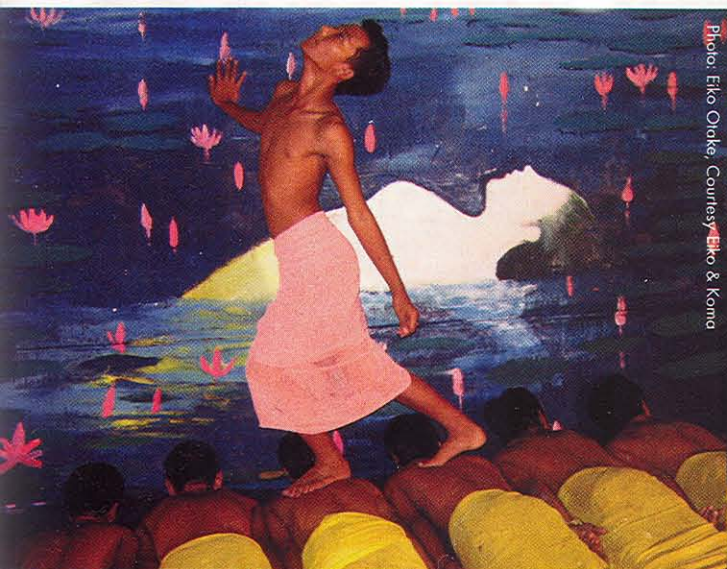


Photo: Eiko Otake, Courtesy Eiko & Koma



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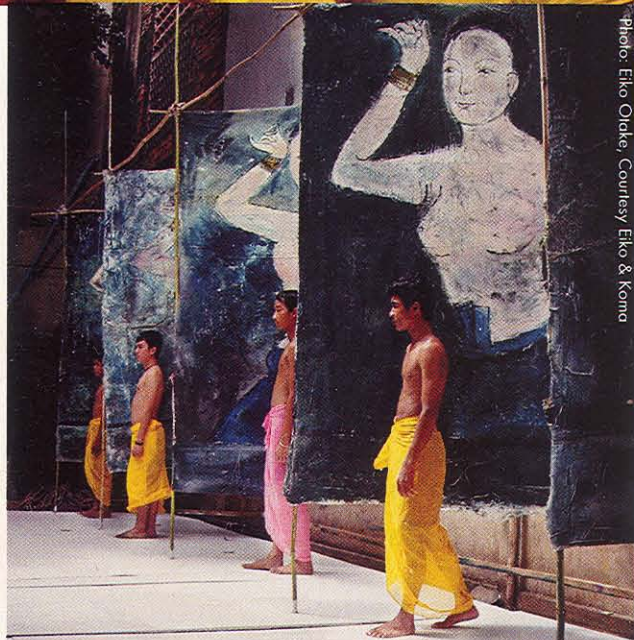


Photo: Eiko Otake, Courtesy Eiko & Koma

Eiko & Koma's current U.S. tour includes young members of the Reyum painting collective. Here, in the Reyum courtyard in Phnom Penh, they participate in a work-in-progress showing for *Cambodian Stories*.

patients at Duke University Hospital, they gave brief performances (three to five minutes) for one patient at a time—dancing in a room's doorway or the portion of corridor visible from a bed. As Koma remarks, simply requesting one of these available private showings is a way for patients, trapped in a situation where they often feel helpless, “to show power.”

This spring marks the culmination of a project that will play conventional theaters in the U.S. for two months: *Cambodian Stories, An Offering of Painting and Dance*, with music by Cambodian composer Sam-Ang Sam. Joining Eiko & Koma will be 10 young members of the Reyum Institute of Arts and Culture in Phnom Penh. In 2004, with support from the Asian Cultural Council, Eiko & Koma spent three weeks in Cambodia, performing, talking, and giving workshops at the Reyum Institute of Arts and Culture, whose director, Daravuth Ly, had seen one of the couple's New York per-

formances. They returned in 2005 and will go again this year. The project involves not just teaching and choreographing but raising funds for the school.

As Cambodians struggle to recover from the horrific depredations of Pol Pot's genocidal regime on culture and the economy, these gifted young people (18 to 22) at the Institute study traditional Cambodian painting styles, with their filigreed detail. Some may become artists of stature; some may forge profitable careers creating souvenirs. Now another career might be possible.

How do Eiko & Koma teach dance to these young painters? Very subtly. Koma remarks that when he and Eiko studied with Ohno, they didn't learn a technique. “He never taught us how to become dancers...I learned a manner, a stance, also a feel.” The spirit, the feelings, and the movements are there in the students' bodies and have only to be uncovered, freed. And, of course, Eiko & Koma's performing, amazing to the Cambodians, suggested new possibilities, just as seeing the pictures of works by Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock that the two brought to Phnom Penh helped the students understand that they might paint differently—bigger, perhaps, and faster—without losing their cultural identity.

In a touching video document, each student responds to a question about his or her future. Almost all of them say, in one way or another, “I want to be an artist. And I want to be a performer.” This spring, cities from New York to California and Florida to Connecticut will see them as both. As part of the choreography, they will create one large painting on the stage floor and another hanging vertically, both intricately linked to the dancing. And they will have the distinction of appearing in Eiko & Koma's first group work, joining these two remarkable artists' quest “to be accountable in today's changing world.”

Deborah Jowitt is the principal dance critic at the Village Voice. Her most recent book is Jerome Robbins: His Life, His Theater, His Dance.