

Experiencing Hunger: Points of entry into the work of Eiko & Koma

By David Ravel



1.

The curtain is closed. Houselights dim to half. In front of the proscenium, far stage left, there are some instruments from a gamelan orchestra. A musician in traditional Javanese dress enters. He sits beside the *gender barung*, a xylophone-like instrument, and begins to play, softly, quickly, like rain, intensely meditative (the first paradox in what will be an evening of paradox).

As the musician continues to play, the lights dim and extinguish. Black theatre. Black stage. The music stops.

Silence. And darkness. And for what seems longer than some might consider comfortable, we sit in this silence and darkness, a testing of patience, an invitation to submission (the second paradox in less than as many minutes?).

A pale light illuminates a small, unoccupied portion of the center stage. The light moves with stealth away from us, illuminating a larger section of the space, initially revealing nothing more than the emptiness we already imagined, until within the surrounding darkness, we sense something coming into focus. Two shapes. Vertical, roughly parallel to each other. Dark hazy orange. Two marks staking a claim within a seemingly infinite and otherwise undifferentiated space.

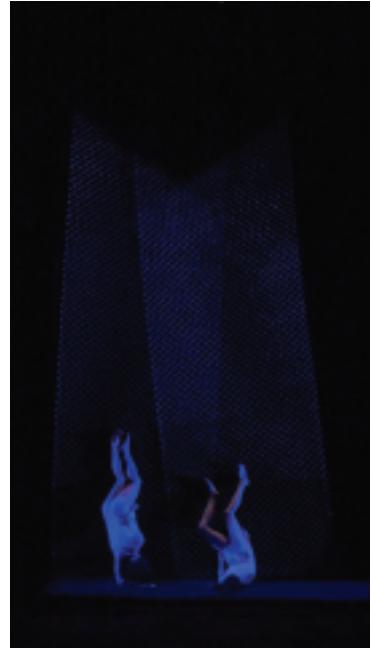
As the lights slowly gain in intensity, these two dark hazy orange marks become less hazy, more distinct. Amorphous form evolves into defined silhouette. Details within the silhouette come into focus, revealing, gradually, Eiko and Koma, nude, suspended, inverted, against a chain link fence.

So begins *Hunger*. For the first seven times I saw it, this introductory sequence (around three minutes or so) seemed so still, like something waiting to happen.

But with the eighth viewing, I could experience this sequence not only as a kind of movement (the third paradox?), but as a succinct image that would have a resonance and evolving meaning throughout the subsequent piece – specifically brushstrokes, the kind of initial marks a painter makes, a way of establishing meaning – a here/not-here, a “this is what human expression looks and sounds like – small, fragile, tentative – against and within the indifference of nature and heaven”. The foreshadowing was thrilling.

Of course, the problem here is that foreshadowing can only be thrilling when one knows what's coming next. It is only from the luxury of retrospect that I could understand not only how the dance would emerge from this initial image, but also how the meaning of the entire piece was contained within it.

This beginning moment, endless and brief, (paradox number four?), summoned forth everything that was to follow. Why did it take eight times for me to understand that the dance would begin even before the lights would transform these marks into bodies, and before these bodies would have the opportunity to move? This is a significant question for me, not only as a member of an audience seeking as rich an experience as possible, but also because in my professional life, I am a presenter. I am responsible for providing as rich an experience as possible for my audiences. How does that happen? What are the circumstances I need to create so that people can derive the most pleasure and meaning from our



performances? And how do I do this when we all know full well that rarely if ever will they have the opportunity to see the work more than once, let alone eight times?

2.

On Wed, Oct 22, 2008 at 3:21 PM, David Ravel <David.Ravel@alverno.edu>wrote:

Dear Eiko and Ivan -

I thought I'd take a moment to describe what it is that I think I'll be doing next week and see if our expectations are similar.

The idea is this - that I would attend each of the six performances during the Joyce run and keep some kind of written record as to

- How the piece evolves from night to night; and
- How my own understanding of the piece evolves from night to night.

As soon as I articulated these two points, I realized that something was missing. And I think that missing element is some sort of record of first impressions, something that I have already lost after the Alverno dress. And so, as a way to balance my own ongoing examination, at each performance I will invite one guest who will be seeing the work for the first time and record their impressions.

Obviously what I will be providing will only be a small, inexact and imperfect record of a much larger experience. I think it might be useful if, at the end of all of this, we might supplement this with

- Photographs of the performance. I hope that these might include photographs of the set without the dancers as it appears in each of its six sections. (One of the things I want to write about is the evolution of the design throughout the piece).
- It would also be extraordinarily cool if Eiko (and/or any of the others involved in the making and performance of Hunger) might keep some kind of log of these Joyce performances - how they may change the piece from night to night, how their own understanding of the piece and what they do evolves from performance to performance, the feel of the different audiences, etc.

Ivan - I come in on Tuesday, 10/28 at 1:30 at LaGuardia. I'm meeting Kim C. (my first guest) in front of the Joyce around 5:45 p.m. or so. Where should I go first - to your office? To the Struggles on W. 74th? How do we go about arranging for the key, etc?

I return to Milwaukee on Monday, November 3, at 5:30 p.m. (Just in time to vote).

So what do you think?

D.

-----Original Message-----

From: Eiko Otake [mailto: eikootake@gmail.com]
Sent: Wed 10/22/2008 10:14 PM
To: David Ravel
Subject: Re:

EKCP are all quite happy and be a bit challenged to have you for every performance. We started to perform this work as work-in-progress in early September and kept experimentation going... we always knew the New York season is at the end of this journey... so at this point, unlike in Milwaukee where we had a luxury of time to try and error, the structure might not change much. After all in the Joyce Theatre, once we open, crews do not come in until 30 min before the house open so we cannot make any change that involves structure, light or tech but only in details and nuances. That said, every performance will have a different feel to it.... Tue is what we call professional audience: writers, funders, critics and field professionals. The Wed/2nd performance usually has to deal with the sense of "repeat" and low energy feeling... Thursday is still with small audience but over the weekends the number of viewers will grow and so does the excitement. but the weekends audience tend to be more general, mainstream. My mother arriving on sat.... we will get together and hear your impressions during the week... love, eiko

On Thu, Oct 23, 2008 at 9:28 AM, David Ravel <David.Ravel@alverno.edu> wrote:

Good morning, Eiko – It is not my intent to offer a further challenge. My goal is not that of a critic, but more of what Virginia Woolf describes as the “common reader.” This experiment is more for me. It’s an attempt to ascertain the source of Hunger’s powerful visceral affect. I am frustrated, intrigued, excited that something that moves me so deeply is so hard to put into words. As a member of the audience, and as a presenter, it’s important for me to be as rigorous, exact and expressive as I can be in response to a work.

So the response I am seeking to explore next week is not “is the piece any good” – it already is that – so much so that it moves me to spend this time and thought and energy with it to figure out why.

There’s more to say on this, and I hope to get to it sometime over this weekend (as much for myself as for you), but for now, please know that I don’t seek to challenge. I want to explore.

With love, D.

-----Original Message-----

From: Eiko Otake [mailto: eikootake@gmail.com]
Sent: Thu 10/23/2008 10:43 AM
To: David Ravel

I know what you mean but please know any support or any curiosity is both a pleasure and also a challenge in a very good way. You are my dream audience, the kind I always imagine when I perform.

As I said before, being moved by an art work is to unconsciously celebrate one’s life and a wonder of living. As we plan our retrospective (in this difficult economy) we hope to publish a catalogue or a book. Wesleyan Press is already committed and that is highly exciting.

I love to write but hardly give myself time to do so. Maybe you will inspire me. Your wife used the exact same word “visceral” when she gave us her feedback on our show and that is wonderful. I am amazed how you two are connected in the feelings and articulation. When you come to New York, I will be introducing you to many of my closest friends. Even only for that reason, it is a great pleasure to have you in New York. Eiko

3.

The challenge is this: how do I train my eye to see with greater acuity? And then, after the initial experience, how do I retain those impressions? What remains? What is lost?

Prior to booking E&K as part of our 08/09 season, I had seen them perform on three occasions. The first was in Chicago. The peice was *Death Poem and Duet*. It began with Eiko already on stage, prone, still,

under a net. (My recollection may be inexact, possibly completely off the mark, but that is the point of this exercise – what is remembered, what stays, what leaves.)

I don't remember much more as to the details. My own impressions were just as vague. I was confused, discomfited, didn't grasp many of the trees let alone the forest. I was certain that there was something there, even if I didn't know what it was, and like some difficult yet ultimately rewarding novel, I would need to apply myself with rigor – like an intense exercise regimen or quitting smoking.

The second time was at Tanzmesse in Dusseldorf. This was in August 2006 (which means that the earlier Chicago performance I saw was in November 2005?) Context, if not everything, is certainly a lot, and I think I benefited from seeing E&K perform this second time within a festival setting. Attending lots of dance morning, noon and night over several days can have a certain bludgeoning effect. But for me – worried that I don't get it, convinced that there is some secret semaphoric language, confident that everyone around me has its Rosetta Stone and I am neither clever nor industrious enough to find it for myself – the plethora of dance data in wildly varying forms was oddly calming. I became less concerned with what I did and did not know and (not so) simply gave myself over to watching.

I might be mistaken, but I think E&K performed the same piece that I saw earlier in Chicago. (Eiko has since told me that it was a similar program, although constructed differently.) I remember Eiko underneath the net. I remember Koma making a slow cross from one side of the stage to the other. And I don't remember much more than that, except at some point during the performance (the middle? Towards the end?) a rock of emotion welled up from inside, and I started sobbing, quietly, shamelessly. Andrea Snyder was sitting next to me, and she was crying as well. I'm not sure who went first – my attention was so riveted to the stage that I wasn't all that aware of what was happening only inches to my right. But through peripheral vision I saw Andrea grab her seriously large handbag and fumble furiously through it. Claiming her prize, she thrust some Kleenex towards my stomach. I grabbed it just as reflexively, and we remained spellbound until the dance's conclusion. Again, practically all of the details are missing, but I remember the emotion – Aristotle's "terror and pity", purged and cleansed.

The third time was in New York in October 2007, at the Japan Society. I was already forming the idea that I wanted to present E&K at Alverno, even though I still had not figured out how a performance that relies so heavily on floor work might fare in my theatre. (In each of the prior performances I attended, the house was raked, thus allowing the audiences clear sightlines towards everything that was happening on stage, including the significant amount of work E&K perform prone. As my theatre uses a more traditional configuration of raised stage and lowered house, I was concerned as to how this might affect the performance. This was resolved by me finally not wanting that over which I have no control to become an obstacle for something I really wanted to do, and by Eiko walking onto our stage and understanding immediately that they could "cheat" the angles and make the piece work for our venue.)

The performance at the Japan Society was *Mouring*, but I was beginning to catch on to the vocabulary. So while the experience of the "forest" was as captivating (and as devastating) as before, I was beginning to pick out some of the "trees" that went into its making. I could discern a sense of sequence. I could separate one image from another (rather than perceiving the entire work as a singular undifferentiated moment of time), and I could begin to articulate how one image would evolve out of what preceded it.

For the work of most other artists, these accomplishments of perception on my part would be rudimentary. But in encountering the work of Eiko & Koma, these preliminary and basic steps are major; this is because the overall affect of an Eiko & Koma performance is startlingly idiosyncratic. I think it is safe to say that prior to attending one's first E&K performance that whatever one might imagine or describe as "dance" will probably not provide adequate cover. Few works of art are as individual. Few have so little need for the norms and standards of the field. Few ask an audience to venture so far from what is comfortable and known.

There are, I believe, two reasons for this:

The first is that each dance unfolds at an austere and deliberate pace. “Slowly” is an adverb that can be paired with practically every verb used to describe each movement. “Glacial” would be the most common adjective. It is their signature. And it is also, I believe, the first obstacle in attempting to discern the forest from the trees. It is, at first, hard to see the details of the performance because the affect is so unique as to be overpowering. The initial impression is that little happens.

This is an understandable misperception if we mistake “slowness”, admittedly an outstanding characteristic, as a theme of the work. “Slow” is not the content. “Slow” is the medium. It is slow so that everything can be seen and nothing will be missed. In fact, a very great deal is happening, and, in the case of “Hunger”, the content is so dense as to verge upon the epic.

So much, in fact, is happening that on occasion, it appears to come as if from thin air. There is much that is magic in the work of Eiko and Koma, and I do not mean only that which is otherworldly and transporting. I am referring to specific acts of unexplained conjuring. We watch intently a particular moment on one part of the stage, and suddenly, without warning or apparent cause and effect, someone “appears” on another part of the stage. Clearly, an entrance has been made. But through the magic of subtle lighting and masterful composition, our attention is not directed at that entrance. And so we are left with the astonishment of seeing a body occupy space where a moment before there was nothing.

Here, “slowness” takes on an opposite purpose. Rather than being the tool by which everything can be seen, it also becomes a means to re-direct and conceal, the ambulatory equivalent to the magician’s guaranty of “nothing up my sleeves”.

And within this seeming contradiction is the second reason why Eiko & Koma’s work requires a particular initial effort from the audience. We are accustomed to singular interpretations. After an encounter with a work of art, it is comforting to take with us a discreet nugget of meaning. Eiko & Koma’s work resists this impulse, and this is initially troubling. (If “slowness” is about seeing, how can it also be about concealment?)

Eiko & Koma are the least dogmatic of artists, preferring meaning to find and express itself by accrual rather than by declaration. Within this framework, it is not only possible but also desirable for alternate interpretations to arise side-by-side, and, instead of having one contradict and pre-empt the other, both become accurate readings of the work. Rather than an assertion of “either/or,” Eiko & Koma’s work embraces a paradigm of “both/and.”

For example, let’s look at the aforementioned first image in *Hunger* – Eiko & Koma, nude, suspended, inverted, against the chain link fence. The first two times I saw the piece (the dress rehearsal and subsequent performance at Alverno), this opening moment resembled a detail from Hieronymus Bosch – an image of isolation, humanity revolving in the void, alienation. All that followed appeared to evolve naturally from this initial thought.

But two days later, it occurred to me that this was also an image of two embryos in vitro, moments from birth. And, in retrospect, the subsequent narrative also made sense from this starting point. While I was startled by the initial incongruity of a single image suggesting



both decay and fecundity, it eventually became apparent that this kind of purposeful juxtaposition is a key strategy in the work. Subsequent alternative readings do not cancel each other out. Instead, they add to the narrative. In this instance, these opposite readings of the same image, when considered in tandem, suggest a life cycle, the ending becoming the beginning, a consideration of narrative being circular rather than linear. Not “either/or.” “Both/and.” And this, in turn, becomes an especially beautiful place to consider the ensuing work.

But how do we get there? How do we encourage an embrace of paradox? It took me three years and multiple viewings of a single work to arrive at this preliminary understanding. As artists and presenters, how do we support this kind of availability and abandon in our audiences? How do we offer work, particularly work that falls outside of common practice, in a spirit of thrilling adventure rather than of forbidding opacity?

4.

The logistics of live performance challenge an audience’s opportunity for multiple encounters with a single work. We can always retrieve a book from our shelf for a second reading. There is no effort in loading a CD into a stereo or summoning a particular piece on our iPod. Netflix, YouTube and Hulu provide ready access to an extraordinary range of film and video. At the risk of sounding tautological, art that exists as an object may be considered at a pace, time and setting of our choosing, and this, in turn, allows for a deeper engagement and appreciation.

Live performance, art that does not exist as an object but rather as a specific moment in time and space, is not similarly advantaged. We might argue that the relative accessibility of any work that can be digitized (the 21st Century’s response to Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”) has forever altered a contemporary audience’s sense of protocol and expectations. Like it or not, all of us engaged in the creation and distribution of live performance must consider that the point where audience and artist meet (with the presenter somehow arbitrating the exchange) has shifted from where it was less than a generation ago.

This seems to be a good place to state that I in no way advocate a “dumbing down” of the work. But I also believe that the present situation demands that we become more mindful of the context and circumstances of this exchange between artist and audience, and that before we take into account how first impressions shape subsequent experience, we need to sense what the first impressions are.

5.

First impressions obviously exist within a continuum. They are shaped not only by the work itself but also by the unique set of experiences people bring with them to the performance. For the purposes of this essay, I brought along a number of friends who happen to have a great deal of personal and in many cases professional experience with the performing arts. All but two have no prior experience with Eiko & Koma.

For Elizabeth, there was no getting past *Hunger*’s initial severity. The work summoned powerful private resonances and memories, and she felt any deeper engagement on her part would have come with an unwanted sense of personal risk. Still, even from this removed perspective, she was able to recognize and appreciate her response as paradoxical – a work of any less power and authority would not have provoked as strong a reaction. “Eiko and Koma absolutely deliver what they’re intending to achieve, which is big,” she writes.¹

¹ All quotes from friends who accompanied me are from e-mails they sent afterwards.

Her response to the opening section, while grasping a significant degree of detail, also indicates the emotional divide that separates her from the work. “The opening scene showed what first appeared to me as two corpses, hurled upside down against a fence. Then I saw they were moving, but excruciatingly slowly, at which point I thought, OK, they’re not dead yet – or maybe they’re not alive yet – but whatever the case, they’re certainly not fully alive.”

“Then I thought of two sleepers, or two fraternal twin fetuses, dreaming in advance of an uneasy birth. The total blackness of the set, only relieved later by a touch of ghoulish red. The whole evening seemed to me a series of nightmares. Beautifully rendered nightmares, evocations of amazing Japanese prints, Noh plays, and scary Japanese art films, but get me out of here.”

Danny’s response, while more affirmative than Elizabeth’s, shares some interesting parallels. “The first section of the piece was the most compelling for me. As the light came up – light that was cold and stark and blue – I didn’t immediately figure out that the two white, still figures were actually people hanging upside down. Once I did though, my next thought was ‘how in the world are they doing that?’ Then the fence comes into focus and you say, ah!, that’s how. Once the pressing question of physicality gets answered, you can begin to let the movement wash over you. For me, this process was all about the fence. Running down the fence was the long strip of, oh I don’t know how to put it, different fencing. The two figures are on either side of this barrier within the fence, which is itself a barrier but also support. So I saw a man and a woman, exposed, drenched in blue-white light, clinging to a structure that separated them from each other and them from the audience. That this was a way to frame and process the activity on the stage was immediately clear to me. Its validity was reinforced as the two performers slowly, creakily, eerily, turned towards and away from each other and then finally came together, crossing the barrier within the barrier of the fence, and switched places. The first piece made me feel lonely, scared, and sad.”

“In this context,” Danny continues, “the introduction of the younger pair was most welcome. In a way, they were perfect foils to the older performers. Their skin was brown, their hair a richer black, their costumes a more colorful red and white, their movement more vital, powerful. The young woman exuded an almost threatening level of energy and intensity. The young man was more reserved, more delicate, more resigned to his situation. Their embraces were sometimes terrifying, but they possessed a promise of life and vigor and affirmation that stood in stark contrast to many of the older performers’ interactions, which often smacked of despair, despondence, and defeat. This contrast framed my entire experience of the piece.”

Both Danny and Elizabeth offer accurate moment-by-moment descriptions. But I think a particular challenge in Eiko & Koma’s work is how one apprehends the moment-to-moment experience while simultaneously placing it within its larger structure; in other words, how do you tell the forest from the trees. (I offer this observation with the humility of arriving at it only after seeing multiple performances of three different works over a three-year period.) It’s similar to the aforementioned challenge of foreshadowing – it can only be understood as such after the fact.

This is an especially critical concern because in Eiko & Koma’s work meaning is not singular and didactic, it is multiple and associative. At any given moment, a particular response is reasonable and meaningful. So Elizabeth’s description of the work as being similar to a “nightmare,” or Danny contrasting the beauty and vitality of Peace and Charian (Eiko & Koma’s two young Cambodian collaborators in *Hunger*) with the cold and exposed bodies of Eiko and Koma is entirely on point.

But when placed within the previous and subsequent moments, new, alternative and sometimes opposing meanings find voice. Placing individual moments within the larger context is a particular challenge in Eiko & Koma’s work. (Perhaps the slowness, how it alters our ordinary conscious sense of time, has

something to do with this.) Eiko offers a useful clue here: “We often take our inspiration from nature, which has its own sense of time and a grotesqueness that in our eyes can be beautiful.”

Esther’s approach into the work begins with this longer view, coming at it, so to speak, via the forest rather than a specific tree: “The production was totally unique and thoroughly impressive. I say production, rather than dance performance because for me it was an artistic experience. The total sensitive integration of sight, sound and movement were so seamlessly and movingly done as to make talking about this piece (*hunger*) in separate parts impossible. To begin, it was like a painting slowly coming to life and almost imperceptibly unfolding. And yet, at the same time the movements were very sculptural in their style. You were lifted onto a level which included moments more easily defined as dance because of their open use of space and dramatic storytelling content.”

Esther’s metaphors to visual art are telling. An object can be apprehended all at once. A performance must be experienced through the passing of time. By recognizing that Eiko & Koma’s work employs elements from both worlds, Esther employed multiple strategies that allowed her to find a stable entry into the piece.

With the advantage of *Hunger* being his second Eiko & Koma performance, Andy was able to share something of Esther’s longer view: “I’m most struck by how my attention changes as the piece unfolds – at first, it makes me incredibly uncomfortable. I’m just not used to engaging with a performance at this speed. It actually made me panic a bit when I first saw them.” He goes on to note that the piece demands a quality of attention that becomes transformative not only for the audience but for the performance itself – a variation on Heisenberg’s principle where the observation of an event changes it. “The attention the dance demands from the audience magnifies the dance. I don’t experience this like other performances – sure, every piece tries to change the room with what they’re doing, but those moments are incredibly difficult to string together. Eiko & Koma have the remarkable ability to sustain those moments over a much larger stretch of time.”

Time and our perception of its relative intensity is an ongoing idea for Kim and her consideration of Eiko & Koma’s work. Unlike everyone else who accompanied me, Kim has the most experience with E&K, both as audience and presenter. Her first exposure to E&K was in the mid-80s in Washington, DC, where she and her husband were living at the time. Both were very involved with the DC Punk scene. One night, Kim took her husband to see the American Ballet Theatre’s production of *Giselle*, and then the following night, they went to see E&K in *Grain* (something of an alpha and omega experience). These were her husband’s first interactions with dance. He thought *Giselle* was fine, but he was seriously taken with *Grain*, declaring it “far stranger” than anything the punk scene had to offer.

Kim described the intensity of *Grain* and of the subsequent E&K pieces as being of a degree where she felt as if she might inhabit the work completely. (Her only other experience of this kind was a similar desire to live inside Johnny Thunder’s Marshall Amp.)

She notes that especially in the beginning of their careers, E&K generally performed in small spaces – black boxes, lofts, and galleries. (She mentions the similarity between the size of these spaces and Max’s Kansas City, the legendary punk venue, and wonders if the similar affect of these two wildly different kinds of performance might have something to do with a shared sense of proximity between performer and audience.) She describes an afterglow from the performance, a cleansing of one’s sensory apparatus, where for a while one apprehends more acutely the details of living.

After the performance that Kim and I attended, we discussed with Sam Miller how *Hunger* assumes a form that approaches the epic. This has less to do with duration and more to do with context. We agreed that many of E&K’s earlier works felt like Beckett one-acts, especially the later ones that are relatively short in duration, have a minimal amount of activity but possess extraordinary affect. Eiko & Koma’s collaboration

with Peace and Charian in *Hunger* introduces a new element into the work, the idea of generations and their passing. Somewhere within the fifth section of the piece, I was beginning to sense that the performance contained so many distinct events and interactions that it was beginning to feel like Tolstoy. Sam admitted to a similar idea, but the work that came to his mind was *Lear*. Kim wrote: “Unfortunately, I am not familiar enough with *King Lear* or Russian literature to completely grasp your analogies to the feeling provoked by the performance but I think you are talking about how certain special artists help you feel and understand the world more profoundly than you thought was possible. Or, at least, that is how I often feel when I think about how Eiko & Koma’s performances have changed my life and the way that I think about art. Their work, and *Hunger* in particular, makes me feel as if I am being invited into a landscape of inner peace and compassion where I can happily surrender and contemplate existence and the beauty of stillness and movement. Their performances have astounding spiritual qualities and generosity that reinforce my belief that art will always be more satisfying, accessible, complete, and humane than organized religion.”

Consider the distance between Elizabeth’s “nightmare” and Kim’s “landscape of inner peace and compassion.” Both are accurate, and yet the truth of either position depends on where we stand in relation to what we see. We will need to examine this idea of where we stand relative to the work and how this creates point of view later.

For now, let’s conclude this section with Kim’s observation of the underlying experience that I believe is shared by each of the guests who accompanied me to the performances – “Having had the privilege of being an audience member at Eiko & Koma’s shows since 1985 and sometimes even presenting them, I am always struck by the intensity of the relationship with the audience during the performance. I remember how other audience members who were not frequent dance watchers whose epiphanies at their performances helped affirm my appreciation and belief in dance and how it doesn’t have to fall into my stereotypes of what kind of dance aesthetics will translate to newer audiences and uninitiated dancegoers. So I am very intrigued to learn the process and impressions of your experiment with *Hunger*.”

6.

The performance – A difference between the Joyce and Alverno performances is the presence of a live musician. LSL, there are four Gamelan instruments – a drum (*kendhang ageng*), a gong (*gong ageng*), a type of xylophone (the aforementioned *gender barung*), a smaller gong (*kemanak*) and a string instrument similar to a far more elaborate single-stringed spike fiddle (*rebab*). House lights dim to half. The musician takes his place and plays an “overture,” soft bell-like tones. (Terry Riley, LaMonte Young, Philip Glass, among others, prepared us for this – and, of course, they all learned much of what they know from Southeast Asian music.)

House lights out.

Section 1 (Naked)²:

Lights rise on E&K, nude, inverted, suspended upon two vertical sections of chain link fence UC. Koma’s back is to the audience. Eiko faces the audience.

[It goes without saying that each subsequent verb describing movement is accompanied by the adverb “slowly.”]

Eiko’s feet sink towards the floor. Her back follows. It all seems to happen before you can see it – you don’t notice the path so much as the destination. They turn away from each other. Eiko supports her body on her shoulders. Koma’s body rests on his neck.

² The subtitles for each of the six sections come from Eiko & Koma.

(The light feels warmer at the Joyce -- at Alverno, I remember it as being colder, more blues, less yellows.)

Their feet come toward each other. There is trepidation, but it is tender. Koma tucks his head under Eiko's back. Eiko lowers her legs so that they cover Koma's back. Koma curls into a fetal position (the first of many in this piece), as Eiko crosses over him. They pass over each other and reassemble on the other side, each now occupying the starting position of the other.

Section 2 (Pink):

First thing we hear are the sounds of birds and crickets. Lights up DC reveal Eiko asleep. Lights continue up the stage, and we see behind the chain link fence a large grey drop covering the entire back of the stage. A minimum of black brush strokes suggests a river in the foreground and a grassy bank running along behind it. We also see Peace and Charian behind the chain link fence (which covers about the center third of the drop) continuing to paint this scene.



This raises an immediate question – clearly this painting suggests the natural world. It stands in stark contrast to the visuals in Section 1 – the two naked bodies inverted and suspended on the chain link fence, a suggestion of the void, of alienation, of humanity in the abstract. This new section places the performers in a recognizable physical environment. So are we now in the world? But Peace and Charian are painting it. So is the environment an autonomous entity or a projection, something solidly external or something of our own creation? Either/or. Both/and. And with each stroke of the brush against the canvas, soft light undulates from behind and momentarily becomes a part of the painting (thus introducing the transience of the performing arts into the materiality of the visual arts).

Eiko opens her eyes and turns her head. As she does this, the lights grow brighter on Peace and Charian, yet there is a gulf that still separates them. Peace and Charian become silhouettes and exit as Eiko raises her head.

(It's important to note that so much of the movement has the appearance of simultaneity rather than cause and effect. Movement, and the events suggested by them, happens in tandem or through a parallel arrangement of time and space. Rarely did I have the feeling that a gesture from one prompted a response from someone else.)

The musician taps the drum softly. Koma appears UR, upright. Eiko turns UC and raises herself as Koma approaches. Step. Stop. Step. Stop. He approaches Eiko, yet he looks away from her, towards the audience (or, more specifically, the space occupied by the audience).

They meet. Do they see each other? He breathes into her ear, and with that breath, Koma lowers himself, and Eiko rises. For a brief moment, they see each other. They separate, Eiko now rising above Koma.

Section 3 (Chicken/Buddha)

We hear the recorded Javanese court music. Peace is on his back, his head towards the audience, DC. Charian is UC, in front of the chain link fence (which is now covered by a translucent grey drop), bent at the waist, facing Peace. Further US, Eiko walks the length of the stage, SR to SL, wearing a kimono.

Charian straightens her body, raises her right arm, and turns her head. From his prone position, Peace also turns his head at the same time, at the same pace; again the sense is of simultaneity rather than cause and effect.

Eiko continues her walk across the stage, but she is now turning her head as well, looking behind her, then out to the audience, then, as before, straight ahead.

This is the first suggestion of generations, that younger people are enacting their life narrative, much in the way these narratives have always been enacted.

Outside of their moment, Eiko can witness (or remember) what this narrative was, and this witness/memory informs her present journey, destination unknown.

And the younger narrative? Peace has curled into the fetal position. Asleep? Charian stalks Peace, both arms raised and extended behind her back – suggesting wings, but nothing soft or delicate. Mighty wings, rapacious, a bird of prey. Her focused ferocity is stunning. Crouched on her haunches, she mounts Peace, one foot on his lower torso, the other on his shoulder. From this position, she rises, extending to her full height, her arms/wings in violent victory. She dismounts, hovers over Peace, backs away, and turns, as does Peace, still in a fetal position. Charian exits.

Has Peace been asleep? Was this attack by the bird a dream? (Although it's a clear premise within the work that dream is as vivid and consequential as conscious experience.)

In a languid, seemingly unaware state, Peace sits up and assumes an asymmetrical pose – his left leg extended to the side, bent up at the knee, his foot pointing upstage. With his left arm, he rests his elbow on top of his foot, and then tilts his body towards the left so his head is now supported by his left hand. He is sleepy and magnificently oblivious.

He begins to gather a sense of where he is, and as he does that, he also gathers a sense of who he is in this place. Live gamelan music joins the recorded music, and as his awareness increases, so does his self-regard.

At the same time, Koma appears prone USR. Two things to note here – Koma really does seem to appear – there is no sense of entrance or a change in the light that reveals someone who was already there. At one point, the stage only contains Peace. And at a later point, Koma is there as well – the process mysterious, magical. It's the great magician's trick – "look over here while I put something into place over there."

The aforementioned sense of simultaneity – EM Forster's famous distinction between random events (the king died and the queen died) and plot (the king died, and then the queen died of grief). What happens isn't random, but it can't be explained by the conventions of dramatic narrative either. It finds meaning through some other shape or genre – the way painting makes sense, or the way music connects to a listener. Because it happens on a stage with people, it's understandable why dramatic narrative would be the default option. But, I believe, most post-modern dance in general and E&K's work in particular accumulates meaning "in addition to" rather than "because of," that there is a logic to the sequence of images and events, but it is a logic based in something other than causality.

As Koma crawls on his stomach towards Peace, the young man's pleasure in his strength and physical



beauty intensifies, and his self-possession approaches climax. Finally, the law of entropy dictates the inevitable outcome, and Peace collapses. Koma crawls towards Peace's prostrate body. Peace rises, but shaken, vulnerable. And, once again, he falls.

Section 4 (Shrimp/Rice Charian Peace Eat)

Charian is LC on her stomach (occupying the same part of the stage as Peace in the prior section). As she gains consciousness, she raises her right leg above her, as high as she can. The movement is fierce, claiming the space through naked aggression.

Eiko appears UL (the opposite part of the stage from Koma in the prior section). Charian becomes acutely aware – of where she is, of who she is right now. But unlike Peace's self-possession in the earlier section, Charian's sense of burgeoning consciousness expresses an overwhelming sense of and struggle with hunger. This sense of hunger, of personal lack, of something that should be there and is not -- this absence is compounded by shame. As Charian's disgrace intensifies, Eiko retreats, and Peace and Koma enter from opposite sides of the stage.

Peace approaches Charian. Koma stays in place and watches the ensuing scene - - a mirroring of the prior Section where Charian is the active partner to the more receptive/recessive Peace, and Eiko is the witness. The theme of generational ebb and flow introduced in Section 3 (from the female perspective?) is developed further here (from the male?).

Peace carries a garment made of coarse brown fabric. He approaches Charian and kneels beside her. He opens up the garment and offers the rice that is inside.

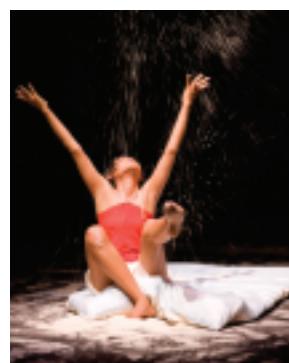
With this offering of the rice, Koma re-commences his procession across the stage, and the musician begins chanting.

Peace embraces Charian from behind and holds the rice garment to her face. They rise, remaining in the embrace. The feeding becomes voracious, savage, ecstatic. Koma turns away from them, as if this witnessing/remembering of feeding/fighting/appetites taking over is too painful to see/recall, and as Peace and Charian's consumption exceeds its boundaries, unchecked appetite leads to mutual destruction.

(We think of entropy as a kind of gradual dissipation, but like so much else in this piece, it can also be its opposite – an explosion of excess energy.)

Section 5 (Eiko Koma Eat)

In some ways, this is my favorite part. It begins with a full illumination of the stage, the first time in the piece where nothing is in shadow and the known world is felt as something vast and expansive. There is a similar sense of the infinite in the first Section, but it takes place in the opposite point of the continuum, a measureless dark void. Here, the light suggests a world of unbounded possibility.

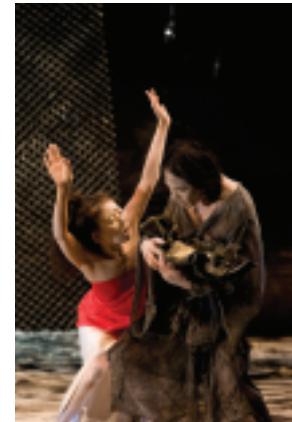


Eiko enters SL. She wears a white skirt and a red-orange top. She is upright, on her toes, arms reaching above her head, palms forward. It's as if she is suspended, both in movement and in consciousness. In what is one of the few moments of relatively fast movement, Eiko traverses the stage. It feels as if her entire body is one exquisitely tuned sensory apparatus. Rather than taking in the world merely through her eyes or her ears, every microscopic part of her physical being absorbs meaning, and this nourishes her soul.

(It is interesting to consider the different ideas of beauty presented throughout the piece. In Sections 2, 3 and 4, Peace and Charian's vibrancy and youth are undeniably appealing. Their movement, however, is largely crabbed and circumscribed. Contrast this with Eiko in Section 5 – unquestionably older, weathered, yet her range of movement and emotional availability conveys a radiance that only comes through significant life experience. She is breathtakingly beautiful, and beautiful in a way that is unavailable to those who are merely young.)

Koma enters SR, bearing the same rice garment that Peace shared with Charian in the previous section. Koma follows a singular path, whereas Eiko moves in multiple directions. Again, the significantly larger amount of stage space used in this sequence is noteworthy, as if with this enlarged sense of consciousness, the possibilities of the physical world become greater.

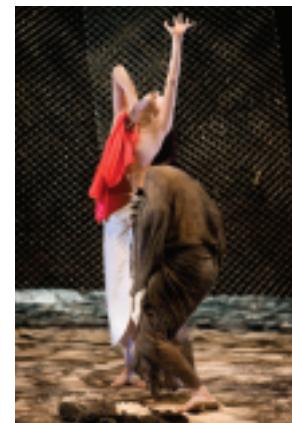
But with increased possibilities also comes the risk of unanticipated adversity. Koma eats the rice. Eiko watches, retreats, comes closer, finally approaches Koma. Suddenly, her previous sense of autonomy and self-sufficiency is threatened by the introduction of a source of external sustenance. She, too, eats the rice; separate, warily, yet together. (There is a push/pull throughout the piece between autonomy/alienation and need/suffocation.)



Unlike the previous section where the shared feeding between Peace and Charian became bestial, this need of the older couple comes with an experience that suggests the possibility of grace. How do we feed? How do we nourish? When does appetite become rapacious? Where is the balance between enough and too much?

There is joy and wonder as Koma feeds rice to Eiko, and it is this feeding of her that inspires him to feast off of her body. Unlike Peace and Charian's unbounded, self-centered and ultimately destructive ecstasy in the earlier Section, there is something more balanced here, a sensual joy in giving, a desire to receive as a way of returning pleasure.

Eiko and Koma rise while continuing to eat, and as they ascend, her red-orange blouse falls off, revealing her bone-white upper torso. She moves away from Koma, sated, transported. (The suggestion of "petit mort" is appropriate and is about to assume a larger and more literal meaning.)



As she backs off, Koma is left behind. He continues to offer rice, but there is no one there to eat it. Eiko has moved behind the chain link fence. Its suggestion of support and barrier (both/and) has always been present, but the sense of insurmountable obstacle achieves powerful expression here. Eiko is suspended behind the fence, arms together and taut above her head. When Koma recognizes Eiko's absence, he collapses. Koma approaches the fence, the rice garment balanced on his head. He kneels – in prayer, as offering. Eiko makes every effort to join Koma on the other side. The journey across the fence is arduous, but she does make her way, finally freeing herself from the other side (even as her right hand clings

tenaciously to the back of the fence). (Does the ferocity of Koma's prayer, another form of appetite, bring Eiko back from the dead? Other than through the ferocity of will, how else do the dead return to us?)

Without her red-orange blouse, Eiko is spectral. Clearly the being before us is not the same person as before. In an image that mirrors the similar moment in the Peace and Charian feeding frenzy, Koma embraces Eiko from behind. He cannot put his arms around her – it's as if something physical cannot hold something immaterial – so he envelops her with the rice garment, wrapping it across her chest, and holding each end of it from behind. Eiko attempts escape. (Is grief how the living hold on to the dead?) Koma will not relinquish his grip. Through his embrace, Eiko rises, falls, rises, falls.



They make their way DC, back to the rice, where for a brief final moment, as if in memory, they feed again, before falling for the final time. Eiko rises above Koma, slowly raining rice on his supine body. Her arms extend above her head and assume the suggestion of wings. But unlike Charian's bird of prey, this bird is sweet, sustaining. Eiko moves SL, as Koma moves USR and behind the fence. In an expression of unrestrained grief, of excess finding release through exhaustion, Koma wraps the rice garment around his head and savagely batters the fence.



Section 6 (Painting)

A blank canvas covers the lower half of the chain link fence. Charian and Peace stand before it and regard thoughtfully its whiteness. With his brush, Peace makes a bold mark against the canvas. (It is especially delightful that with each brushstroke, the pattern of the chain link fence appears briefly on the canvas, a reminder of the inspiration that, in this case, is literally behind the work, that art is a response to lived experience, and, as we will discover, is the means by which our experience is seized and given meaning.) With a minimum of seemingly brash yet remarkably purposeful gestures of brush against canvas, Peace creates a bird ascending.

Now it is Charian's turn. With equal power and dexterity, she paints a second bird, ascending in the opposite direction of the first. The sleek simplicity of the two figures suggests that they are flying at a tremendous velocity, yet for the brief moment of time captured in the canvas, their paths intersect, suggesting, albeit momentarily, that these two autonomous creatures are one.

As Charian and Peace are painting, Eiko appears SL, her bone-white body seeking sustenance one last time through the painters and the painting. ("Oh body swayed to music, oh brightening glance/How do we know the dancer from the dance?") As Eiko makes her way towards Peace and Charian, the canvas rises, and Peace and Charian now paint mountaintops and distant land below. The birds are not only flying at extraordinary speed, they are also approaching extreme altitudes. Just as Peace and Charian complete the painting, Eiko is now beneath the canvas, and Koma enters from SR.

Charian and Peace depart from the painting, but as they make their way to opposite sides of the stage, they drip some of the black paint onto Eiko and Koma – a fascinating reversal of the prior scenes, in which Eiko or Koma witness the actions of Peace and Charian, and in this witnessing, seems to create them. Here, the dynamic is reversed. What has gone, become immaterial, is re-created and re-vivified through the paint.

Eiko holds onto the painting. Koma meets her at and through the painting. Both move against the wet paint and each other, and Eiko and Koma, as people, spirits or memories, become part of and augment the painting, all elements becoming, for the moment, inseparable.

Koma gathers Eiko in his arms and hoists her over his back. As he lifts her, a second panel (UR) that Peace has been painting on the floor begins to rise. It is a second painting of birds in a more detailed landscape than the first. It places the two birds in the first painting in a larger and more varied landscape.

Koma backs away from the center painting, and the third panel, the one that Charian has been painting, begins to rise. It, too, continues the imagery of additional birds in a more detailed landscape. Koma carries Eiko to the rice that has been LCS throughout the piece. It's as if the renewed life that was initiated in the painting can now sustain itself independently of the work.

Koma sets Eiko down in the rice. He joins her on the floor. They rise. Touch. Part. Hold, until an energy established between their two proximate bodies can be sustained. And then, with painstaking poise and balance, they (not so) simply *are*, side-by-side, autonomous, yet no longer alienated, sustained in a synchronistic cycle of giving and receiving, feeding and eating, ebb and flow.



7.

Hunger ends as it begins, with a mark becoming a body.

In Section 1 (Naked), the transformation is literal. We witness creation as it occurs in nature, autonomous, unmediated by human will. From birth, lives are lived – a continuous and ever-evolving drive towards identity, then sustenance, then balance. One step forward, two steps back. The occasional epiphany explodes the routine, changing everything, becoming more nuanced and complex, until we realize that while the playing fields are different, the game remains the same. And we continue, until, finally, we cease.

Except something uniquely human cannot allow nature to have the last word. This is, of course, vain and pointless. As much as we might argue to the contrary, death always wins.

But our very drive towards identity, sustenance and balance not only defines how we live but also demands that we understand our lives as we are living them. We strive to make something autonomous, something that exists outside of the biological imperative, something that, hope against hope, might defeat death.

And so, in Section 6 (Painting), marks once again become bodies but this time through a specific and willed act of human creation. Eiko and Koma, deceased and lost to each other by the end of Section 5, are restored to the narrative and reclaimed by each other through Peace and Charian's painting.

In addition to beginning and ending with marks becoming bodies, Hunger begins in paradox and, by its conclusion, appears to be contained in a paradox of epic proportions. Like so much else in this work, you would think that the only available ending would be explosion or exhaustion. And yet, the final image couldn't be more contrary or, indeed, paradoxical – after everything that has preceded it, Eiko and Koma are still, balanced, poised, each acutely aware of the other, giving and receiving in a kind of mobius strip, self-sustaining, without end.

Hunger dismantles our impulse towards linear narrative. As something approaches its quintessence, rather than extinguishing, it achieves metamorphosis. The reality in *Hunger* is best understood as nested levels – like nesting dolls or concentric circles – in both space and time.

Just as the opening moments foreshadow and contain the subsequent narrative, so do the closing moments – where Eiko & Koma rediscover each other in the painting and then establish a separate place away from it – encapsulate the whole. It is also here where the piece answers the questions asked at the beginning of this essay – how do we best see this work? Where do we stand in relation to it?

Hunger asks us to reconsider our desire to create a meaning that is singular. Instead, it encourages us to gather as many of the pieces as we can, setting one beside or below or within the other, and seeing all the different ways they fit together.

So what was that we were saying about death? In the world according to *Hunger*, how can we say that something ends?

Photos by Cameron Wittig