

TETSUMI KUDO

# *Proliferating Chain Reaction*

Dancers Eiko & Koma recount their memories of Tetsumi Kudo and coming of age amid the giants of the 1960s Tokyo avant-garde.

*Interview by Doryun Chong*

Tetsumi Kudo was the *enfant terrible* of the postwar Japanese art world. Born in Osaka in 1935, he emerged in the Tokyo avant-garde in the late 1950s and early 1960s with a series of groundbreaking and controversial installations and performances, culminating in *Philosophy of Impotence* (1961–62), a room-size installation of over one hundred black penis or chrysalis-like objects, which was his contribution to the 14th Yomiuri Indépendant exhibition in 1962. Almost immediately after this brazen *succès de scandale*, Kudo relocated to Paris, where he lived and worked for over 20 years. In the last decade of his life, Kudo increasingly spent time in Japan and reoriented his work toward a self-reflexive examination of the cultural identity and spiritual constitution of Japan. He died in Tokyo in 1990.

In December 2008, Doryun Chong, curator at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, talked to New York-based Japanese choreographers, dancers and artists Eiko & Koma. Born in 1952 in Tokyo and in 1948 in Niigata, respectively, Eiko & Koma began their careers as artists in the midst of the Tokyo avant-garde during the 1960s, a period that saw the flourishing of *butoh* dance, which was an important influence on their work. Two months earlier, they had they performed *Hunger* at the Walker Art Center, their fifth commission for the Center.

At the time of the interview, the Walker Art Center was holding both an exhibition and a series of film screenings that related to Eiko &







1

1. *Philosophy of Impotence, or Distribution Map of Impotence and the Appearance of Protective Domes at the Points of Saturation*, 1961-62, installation view at Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 2008. Photo by Gene Pittman.



2

2. (Detail) *Philosophy of Impotence, or Distribution Map of Impotence and the Appearance of Protective Domes at the Points of Saturation*, 1961-62.

3. *Proliferating Chain Reaction (Or, the Flowing Movement and Its Condensation In Mind)*, 1956-57, mixed media, 80 x 100 x 70 cm. Photo by Gene Pittman. Private collection.



3

4. **Tetsumi Kudo** performing *Happening: "Anti-Art,"* Tenmaya Gallery, Okayama, 1958.

5. **Tetsumi Kudo** performing *Happening: "Quiet Event, Your Portrait,"* Piazza San Marco, Venice, 1966.

4a



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*“As a small child, I remember the many empty lots there were left to play in and the cooking smells that pervaded the small alleys of Tokyo.”*

Koma's lives as young adults. The former was “Tetsumi Kudo: Garden of Metamorphosis,” the first US museum show for the late Japanese artist, organized by Chong. The latter was a retrospective of films by Nagisa Oshima, arguably the most radical *auteur* of postwar Japanese cinema.

Using the work of these two key figures of the older generation of the 1960s Japanese avant-garde as a framework for discussion, Chong talked to Eiko & Koma about their memories of this pivotal period in Japanese postwar history and its influence on their thought and work.

**Let's start by talking about your memories of your childhoods in the 1950s.**

**EIKO:** I was born in 1952, the year the US occupation of Japan ended. This was also during the Korean War, which helped Japan's economy grow out of the rubble of World War II [During the Korean War of 1950 to 1953, Japan served as a base and supply station for US forces being deployed to Korea]. As a small child, I remember the long hours people worked, the many empty lots there were left to play in, the fear I felt looking at the many wounded WWII veterans begging in the streets and the cooking smells that pervaded the small alleys of Tokyo.

**KOMA:** I was born in 1948. My childhood home in Niigata, a small town on the coast of the Sea of Japan, was seven hours from Tokyo by train. I also remember those evocative smells too: charcoal-broiled fish, dirty diapers, an old-style squat toilet full of wriggling maggots, as well as fig and persimmon trees. From the late 1950s to the early 1960s, I saw many Koreans who lived in Japan crying as they left their families and boarded special boats for North Korea. It was only later that I learned what a grave political issue this represented [With the postwar division of Korea into the North administered by the USSR and the South administered by the US, Korean subjects in Japan (*zainichi* Koreans) were split into two camps based on their Korean origin as well as their political sympathy. In the 1950s, the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan (Chongryon), with its close ties to North Korea, persuaded many Japanese Koreans to return to the “Socialist Paradise.”] Looking back, I feel these were striking visual images for a child.

**Following this period of reconstruction in the 1950s, what do you remember of the early 1960s?**

**EIKO:** The 1960s in Japan started with the tremendous movement against *Anpo* [The US-Japan Security Treaty, drawn up in 1951, was renewed in 1960 and 1970; thereafter it became permanent until revoked by either party]. Tens of thousands of people rallied and surrounded the parliament building in Tokyo. I remember how upset my mother was when a young female demonstrator was killed during a confrontation between demonstrators and the police and when the treaty was extended in spite of the strong opposition. The 1964 Tokyo Olympics changed the appearance of the city, razing postwar houses and small alleys and replacing them with dull concrete buildings and highways. All the smells and atmosphere that I mentioned before disappeared.

**KOMA:** In the early 1960s, I became aware of the difference between the haves and have-nots. Some had wealth, beauty, education, happiness, ambitions and dreams, while others did not. I decided early on that I would leave my hometown and conquer Tokyo, perhaps the same

thoughts Kudo had had during his childhood in the rural northern prefecture of Aomori and the western prefecture of Okayama.

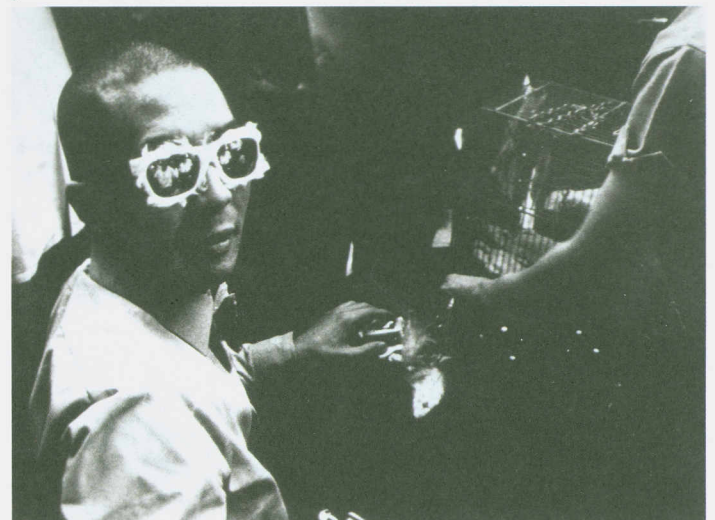
**Your memories of drastic transformations and growing inequities are reminiscent of the backdrops and subjects of some of Oshima's films: for instance, *Town of Love and Hope* (1959), which depicts stark differences between rich and poor and the unbridgeable gaps between them. The turn of the decade was also when Kudo made his powerful presence known in the Tokyo art world with his vigorous performances, sculptures and installations, culminating in *Philosophy of Impotence* (1961–62), a room-sized installation of over 100 small, drooping black penis- or chrysalis-like objects clustered around one large ejaculating phallus—his contribution to the 14th Yomiuri Indépendant exhibition in 1962. At what point did you become aware of Oshima and Kudo?**

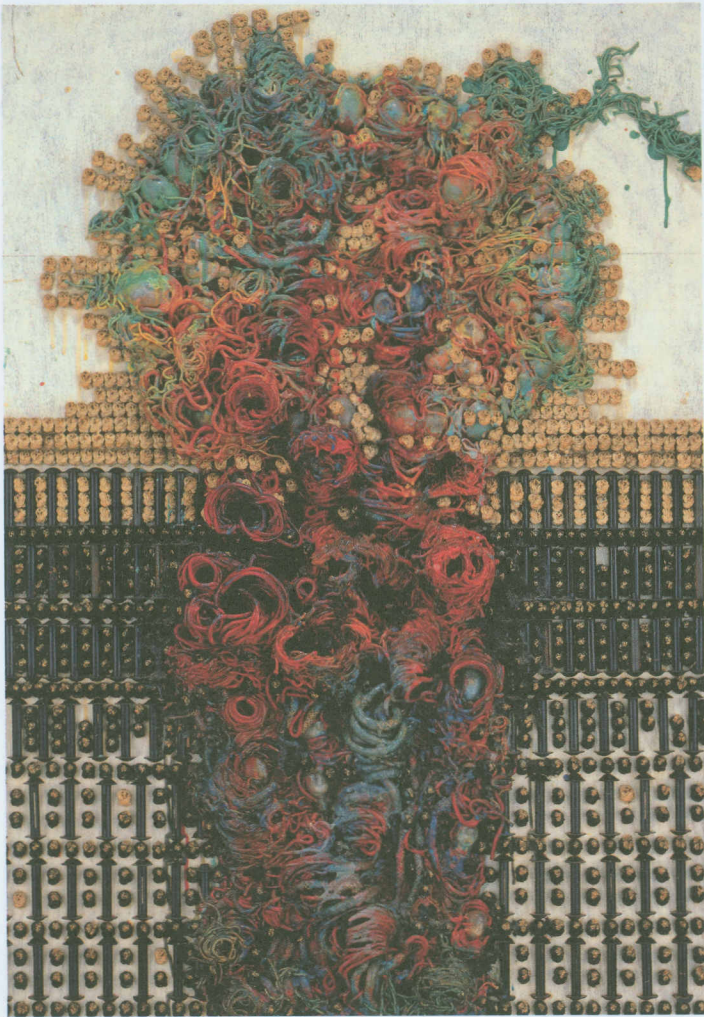
**EIKO:** When I saw Kudo's early work, which I had been aware of from photographic reproductions but only actually saw for the first time in the retrospective at the Walker, I couldn't help but think how big a leap it must have been for him to go from the countryside to the city. His early works were dense with the same postwar, post-occupation moods and smells that I knew as a child.

Though I was not too familiar with Kudo's works then, seeing them now makes me realize that his performances and installations belonged to the same art community in Tokyo as Tatsumi Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno, the founders and teachers of *butoh* dance. They were our seniors but they inhabited the same world of explosive artistic ideas while also harboring the desire to transcend all the chaos taking place—this mood was evident not only in works by Kudo, Hijikata and Ohno, but other artists such as Yoko Ono. Their ideas and performances had a collective influence on us in the late 1960s.

**KOMA:** In your catalog of Kudo's work, Kudo's widow Hiroko writes about the making of his *Proliferating Chain Reactions (or, The Flowing Movement and Its Condensation in Mind)* (1956–1957), a large piece of dry tree root with scores of nails hammered into it and newspapers pasted into its hollow core. She saw maggots growing in the flour-starch paste

5





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6. TETSUMI KUDO, *From Black Mecha to White Mecha...*, 1961, mixed media, 121.1 x 91.3 cm. Courtesy Aomori Museum of Art, Aomori.

7. TETSUMI KUDO, *Grafted Garden/Pollution-Cultivation-New Ecology*, 1970-71, mixed-media installation, 270 x 430 x 527 cm. Courtesy Centre Pompidou, Paris.

8. TETSUMI KUDO, *Cultivation—For Nostalgic Purpose—For Your Living Room*, 1967-68, mixed media, 44 x 59 x 32 cm. Courtesy Aomori Museum of Art, Aomori.



7



8

9. NAGISA OSHIMA, *The Diary of a Shinjuku Thief*, 1968, film stills showing (a) Tadanori Yokoo and Rie Yokoyama, (b) Rie Yokoyama, (c) Juro Kara. Courtesy Cinematheque Ontario.

10. TETSUMI KUDO, *Confluent Reaction in Plane Circulation Substance*, 1958-59, mixed media, 1170 x 185.6 x 60 cm. Courtesy Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo.

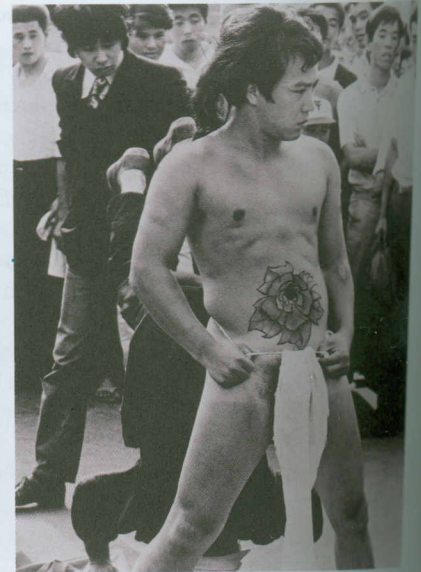
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9c



## “While numerous political theorists presented us with logic, idealism and tactical thinking, somehow these things led us to despair.”

used in the work. She also writes about how she used cooked udon noodles to represent ejaculated semen in *Philosophy of Impotence*: “On the morning of the installation, I had to go around to several vendors in town to find enough noodles.... The museum... complained about Kudo’s installation, claiming that the food would attract rats. Because of these concerns, we had to replace the noodles with cotton strings.”

Something about the rawness and “reality” of how maggots and udon noodles inspired Kudo and his wife to make these works really resonated with me. Like them, the mood of the rapidly changing postwar period has informed our ideas.

**By the end of the 1960s, I believe you were more actively taking in the atmosphere of the time and participating in its explosive developments. It also seems that there were a lot of collaborations between thinkers and creators taking place, for instance, Oshima’s film *Diary of a Shinjuku Thief* (1968), which features playwright and theater director Juro Kara and his troupe, as well as the renowned artist and graphic designer Tadanori Yokoo playing the main character, “Birdie Hilltop.” What do you recall from this time, your beginning as artists and this group of avant-gardists?**

**EIKO:** At that time, my friends and I were student activists. We were too busy with anti-government and anti-Vietnam War demonstrations to pursue art seriously. It was before and after those political protests that Japanese anti-establishment artists such as Oshima, Kara and Yokoo, as well as filmmakers like Jean-Luc Godard and Federico Fellini, meant something to us, and we learned about them by watching their films and through art magazines, such as *Bijutsu Techo*.

While numerous political theorists—none standing out any more than the others—presented us with logic, idealism and tactical thinking, somehow these things led us to despair. By contrast, these artists showed us how they built their lives upon their confusion and frustration. In their works, we sensed that the means and the end are inseparable, that being revolutionary means being radical and that the body is our vessel and foundation for exploration, experimentation, and expression. We liked the way they asked questions without restraint and how they pursued beauty in the grotesque. They did not adhere to the traditional Japanese virtues of silence, patience and empty space, and after all, as aspiring but impatient youth, it was encouraging for us to see an older generation as aspiring and impatient as we were.

It is important to note that Kudo, Oshima, Kara and so on were also talking to us and engaging with our ideas, incorporating them into their work—Kudo even said he specifically came back to Tokyo to see us performing in the streets.

**KOMA:** I moved to Tokyo in 1966 and majored in political science there. I became heavily involved in the student movement and New Left politics, but I found that even those areas were run according to old fashioned hierarchies. The academic world and even the avant-garde art movement had their masters and servants as well. These are not unrelated to the Japanese emperor system. The center of Tokyo is occupied by the emperor’s palace and it is surrounded by the parliament, prestigious universities, the National Theater, elite shopping districts, embassies and investment centers. I thought people’s faces lit up when they got closer to the palace. When I dropped out of college in 1971, I was also dropping out of that society. I was looking for something “real” to

hang on to. It was out of pure luck that one day I met the dancer Kazuo Ohno—back when he was known only among artists, not at the national or international level. If I hadn’t met him and studied under him, I can’t imagine what path I might have taken.

**What influence did Kazuo Ohno and Tatsumi Hijikata have on you at this time?**

**EIKO:** I studied at Hijikata’s studio from 1970 to 1971 after I saw his company’s work. Koma had already been there for three months. When I saw his company perform, I was not so moved as I was shocked. I wanted find out how and why these dancers looked so out of this world. We took his dance classes at night, and all students ate and slept in his studio. They all seemed to follow his orders with utter devotion and together we performed in cabarets to make money for the studio or sometimes in a small, arty theater in the downtown Shinjuku area of Tokyo.

After only three months Koma and I decided to leave and work on our own. Neither of us had gone to Hijikata’s studio to become long-term disciples of his. His studio was a 24-hour engagement and we wanted to work on our own ideas and explore other worlds. We started to stage events and shows by ourselves. At the same time we went to study with Ōhno, whose classes were all about improvisation. He would show us books of paintings by Japanese avant-gardists and give us his thoughts on their work. That was another way in which we absorbed the work of artists who came before us. In speaking to us, Ohno was also able to construct and develop his own ideas.

Around then, however, Koma and I learned that generations of amazing talents including Kudo had left Japan at a young age to develop their artistic voices. That certainly influenced our decision to leave in 1972, to leave Ohno, political activities and art publications behind. I didn’t want to be a good student or an intellectual, but rather an independent and a rebel. Kudo was our model. That said, although we might have learned from the vigor of Kudo and other artists of his generation, we also wanted to live differently from them. Kudo was in the visual art world, leaving behind art objects and archives of his own writings as well as a wide range of literature on his activities. As performing artists we leave fewer traces—except perhaps in people’s memory.

10

