

PERFORMANCE

SICKNESS AND HEALTH

July 03, 2015 • Lauren O'Neill-Butler on Eiko's *A Body in a Station*



Eiko, *A Body in a Station*, 2014. Performance view, Fulton Center, New York, June 22, 2015. Eiko. Photo: Darial Sneed.

FOR THREE DAYS IN LATE JUNE, Eiko Otake emerged on Fulton and Broadway. She looked wan and frail: Her face, arms, hands, and feet were painted chalk-white, a yellow

kimono clung loosely to her thin frame. She seemed dressed up in disease, like a stain and a plague against the city's latest picture of health, Fulton Center. The gleaming new subway complex is an efficient symbol of vigorous capital and regrowth after 9/11.

Carrying a bouquet of dried weeds, Eiko made eye contact with viewers gathered for *A Body in a Station*, 2014—, and then took in the rest of the midday scene as if she were looking at nothing at all. Summer clouds threatened their daily microburst as the crowd grew and followed her inside the Center. Gradually, the procession made their way to an overlook by the escalators. Over the hour, among the hustle and bustle of the living—while commuters rushed, babies cried, and sirens blared—Eiko allowed the work to quietly reveal itself. The malady spread. It took time to develop; nothing was fast.

It never was. For nearly forty years, Eiko and her collaborator Koma have advanced a Kazuo Ohno-inspired treatise on impotency. Recently, they've been recognized for a protracted, withering choreography; for their spare, silent actions; and for scenes that evoke pathos through shades of grief and anguish. These are precise, obsessional affairs. Eiko and Koma do not label any of it Butoh, though a slowness and darkness evoke it, and though their work and Butoh derive from similar sources—Hiroshima and Nagasaki. While imbued with a similar urgency and intent as before, *A Body in a Station* is Eiko's solo debut sans Koma. Her collaborator becomes the station, the public (some 300,000 commuters pass through Fulton Center daily), and the vicissitudes of the hour.

Last October, she debuted the piece in an Amtrak station in Philadelphia for a “twelve hour movement installation,” a series of four three-hour performances. That iteration launched a two-year solo project, *A Body in Places*, which seeks to respond to a given site while Eiko performs at times as abject and in other moments as if a cipher, a nobody—poised between being no one and nothing. It's not so far off from our common, everyday experience on subways—we disappear more and more. At its best, *A Body in a Station* trumps this. As we watch Eiko, she watches us. As we disappear, she looks back. If “resolution determines visibility,” as Hito Steyerl says, the ability to see and be seen is of great social and political consequence. Yet resolution must involve *resolve* as well, and this is what *A Body in a Station* excels at.



Eiko, *A Body in a Station*, 2014. Performance view, Fulton Center, New York, June 22, 2015. Eiko. Photo: Darial Sneed.

Employing only the required muscles, Eiko skillfully adjusted her weight to lean on a pole and to inch wormlike across the floor. She clutched a bright red textile, which she eventually waved and pitched, forcing viewers out of her way. She carried the weeds and the cloth, like a dead body, up and down the stairs and then abandoned both when she raised her hands up in surrender for several long minutes. Under the shadow of the Freedom Tower, this was almost too much. But Eiko's non-normative subjectivity wasn't something to easily turn away from. So many passersby stopped for a quick picture, and then stuck around, falling prey to curiosity and gawker's delight. ("When the sick rule the world, mortality will be sexy," Dodie Bellamy forecasts. Finitude is the new black.)

At street level, Eiko stood in front of a nearly thirty-two foot tall LED "wall" of fast-paced commercials for transnational corporations. Here the piece broke down a little, in a good way: What was the relationship between markets and this dance? Was her stillness a revolt? What did her gaze toward us mean then?

According to Michel de Certeau, the sick are “set aside in one of the technical and secret zones (hospitals, prisons, refuse dumps), which relieve the living of everything that might hinder the chain of production and consumption.” Eiko’s unstable existence here trumped that, too. Not only did it blur the distinction between production and consumption, the cultural and the economic: It showed how sickness confounds most everything.

Eiko eventually returned outside and bowed to conclude the piece. The illness as metaphor ended, for now.

“Expect a re-energized Lower Manhattan.” The slogan for Fulton Center never meant less.

A Body in a Station ran June 22–24 at Fulton Center as part of the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council’s River To River Festival.

—Lauren O’Neill-Butler

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