

Eiko Steps Away From One Dance Partner, to Take on Many More

By Gia Kourlas

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For more than four decades, it was Eiko and Koma. But two years ago, after Koma injured his ankle, Eiko, the other half of the husband-and-wife dance duo — treasured for their stark, startlingly slow excavations of stillness and shape while time gradually passes — struck out on her own. The pair are likely to perform together in the future, but for now, Eiko is consumed with a solo project that has transformed her career.

For that, “A Body in Places,” she has danced in train stations in Philadelphia and New York; at the site of the nuclear disaster in Fukushima, Japan; and at the scene of recent protests in Hong Kong. Last month, she performed on the streets of Santiago, Chile. In all of those locations, she used her slender, seemingly vulnerable body as a vessel to embody trauma, fragility and desolation.

The sight of her deliberately moving frame can be both startling and hypnotic as she dances in those “places,” some of which have been sites of suffering or turmoil. Eiko, who imparts a sense of loneliness whether in a train station or in Fukushima, can evoke oppression and hardship without being explicitly political.

Beginning Wednesday, Feb. 17, a few days after she turns 64, Eiko will land in the East Village as the featured artist of Danspace Project’s Platform, a series of performances and events, now in its 10th incarnation, that highlight a theme or a specific choreographer. Her monthlong multidisciplinary series will expand “A Body in Places” through performances, readings, films and installations.

On a recent morning at her Midtown apartment, Eiko placed on her dining-room table a photograph taken during a performance in Santiago. In it, the audience watches as she dances in a pale kimono dotted with red circles, holding the stem of a flower behind her back. She’s haunted, she said, by the intense gaze of one person in the crowd: her friend the poet C. D. Wright, who had traveled to Chile with her husband, Forrest Gander, to see the performances. On Ms. Wright’s first night back home in Rhode Island, she died in her sleep.

“It’s not like every minute I perform thinking, C. D.,” Eiko said. “It’s more that I’m recognizing how the performer’s body is also a collected gaze.”

Eiko said she was reconsidering the Platform in subtle ways to reflect her friend’s death (she’s written a short essay about her for the accompanying catalog) and what it means to have been watched as a performer for so many decades. “They are in me,” she said of the gazes of spectators. “I realized that it’s not only the people who happen to be watching me now. Many of those bodies — back to the people who saw me in the 1970s — could be dead.”

As a performer, Eiko's power has an unassailable intensity, perhaps even more now that she is a solo artist; alone she can radiate both frailty and abandon. "Watching people react to her mesmerizes me," said Judy Hussie-Taylor, the executive director of Danspace Project, who has organized the Platform along with Lydia Bell in collaboration with Eiko. "What is it that she's doing or able to do that captivates people? I've started to think about sprites — she turns herself into a mythological creature."

But the Platform is not just about Eiko as a solo artist. Other artists will take part in programs like "Talking Duets," which will feature Eiko performing structured improvisations with the choreographers Yvonne Meier, Elizabeth Streb and others; in "Precarious," guest artists, including Koma — who is dancing again — will perform solos in response to a quotation about grief and mourning.

Eiko performing in Chile. William Johnston

On Wednesdays, Eiko will teach her all-level Delicious Movement Workshop — which prompts students, as Ms. Hussie-Taylor recalled, "to move across the room leading with your eyelashes" — and host a movie series at Anthology Film Archives. On Thursdays, she will preside over a book club that focuses on place, from postwar Tokyo to the United States, and includes writings by Kenzaburo Oe, Tamiki Hara and Ms. Wright. (Those participating in the book club are sent the readings upon their R.S.V.P.) And on March 11, there will be a 24-hour event focusing on the fifth anniversary of the Fukushima disaster.

Finally, Eiko will continue her project of placing her body in places in a series of daily solos at East Village locations. There will be one a day — some beginning as early as 9 a.m.— Monday through Friday over four weeks. Audience members will be escorted from Danspace Project to witness the intimate solos, which last around 40 to 50 minutes. "It's not stressfully long," Eiko said. "The time becomes dense."

For Eiko, the Platform, which she stressed was Ms. Hussie-Taylor's idea, was possible because of her close bonds with its programmers. Eiko, who calls the event "a shared adventure," has known Ms. Hussie-Taylor since the early '90s; Ms. Bell was her student and intern at Wesleyan University, where Eiko has taught for 10 years.

“Eiko saw me as free labor, which she loves,” Ms. Bell said. “It was like having a full-time job being with Eiko.”

When Ms. Bell moved to New York, she recalled that Eiko told her: “Don’t call me in your first year. You’ve got to go do your own thing.”

That directive crushed Ms. Bell’s dream to continue working for Eiko and taking her movement classes. “I had all these fantasies, but she killed them in kind of a good way.” (One year later, Eiko hired Ms. Bell to work on Eiko and Koma’s “Retrospective Project.”)

It’s not that the programmers have agreed on everything. At first, Eiko didn’t want to perform at 9 a.m. “It’s just against my biology,” she said. “But Judy was saying, ‘There is a sense of freshness in the air.’ She never said, ‘You have to do this,’ but she never backed down.”

As Ms. Hussie-Taylor explained, “At 9 a.m., you see David Vaughan” — the dancer and former archivist of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company — “walking down the street or people who have lived here for years. It’s quiet. No one is partying, and you see the layers of history. The East Village feels like a place.”

And Eiko, no matter where she’s performing, has the ability to delve into the history of that place and its people. Her son Shin has told her that her work seems more political when she dances alone. People who have experienced oppression in any form, in other words, can see her as if they were watching their grandmother or a neighbor.

“He says they can really see their own struggles in my body,” she said. For her, it has to do with the solitary form. “It kind of makes an opening for people to get into my body.”

In a way, it’s similar to how you can suddenly find your eyes boring into a stranger on the subway. “There is a sense of both curiosity and confrontation,” she said. “How dare you have a bag of vegetables, and I don’t? And then we realize, oh no, we shouldn’t look. With me, the idea is, here is a miserable woman, and it’s O.K. to look at her because it’s a performance. But she’s also looking back at me. And if one person walks out, everybody knows it. It’s a super awareness of all of these common things. It’s very transformative.” She laughed with youthful glee. “I had absolutely no idea three or four years ago that this would happen. I’m having amazing experiences.”