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Bodies in a Place

Precarious II: Guest Solos

Platform 2016: “A Body in Places”

Eiko and Guests

Danspace Project

St. Mark’s Church-in-the-Bowery

New York, NY

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by Martha Sherman

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Eiko Otake is a unique presence, mesmerizing in her solo works, which have dominated “A Body in Places,” the Danspace Platform focused on her work this month. She is also generous in community, and has included a wide range of entries to her work, including “Delicious” movement workshops, book club discussions, and a film anthology, as well as several evenings sharing the stage with other artists. Two “Precarious” evenings offered Eiko with several guest artists, and in the second of these, she was joined by seven performers, including her husband (and long-time performing partner) Koma. Each of her guests inhabited a particular spot in the St. Mark’s Church; Eiko danced too, but was often more of a presence, wending among the others, eight distinct and diverse bodies in this many-chambered place.



Photo: Eiko in “Precarious.” © Ian Douglas.



Each of the program’s guests – Michelle Boulé, Jimena Paz, Beth Gill, Neil Greenberg, Geo Wyeth, Arturo Vidich, and Koma – is a movement artist with a unique style, rhythm, widely differing investigation. Their work linked, though, in unexpected ways. Sometimes, the viewer’s line of sight was drawn from one to another, like the view of Eiko’s body as seen from above, splayed like a crime scene victim, while Greenberg danced an energized solo above her on the long balcony of the church. Boulé, danced to a sassy score that bled into Vidich’s ghostly quiet solo next door. She decorated herself in enormous red feathers, evoking the red river of silk that plays through all of Eiko’s solos. In this simultaneous, linked dance festival, the performances required viewers to shift viewpoints and perspectives, not only in different “places” in St. Marks’, but often in the different places of our own peripheral vision, connecting sounds and images instead of separating them.

Most of the performers performed their choreographed solos within a time frame, repeated at several scheduled iterations (with the church’s bells tolling a start time, like a service alerting the parishioners to gather.) Eiko wandered in and out of the events, sometimes shifting into her own postures, or slinking into a corner, still and posed, a quiet adjunct to someone else’s dance. Two performers, Gill and Wyeth, were exceptions to the rule, and each performed for three hours. Wyeth camped in a small dressing room, his costume layers of plastic and accessories, his space in layers of props and colored lights. His

performance evoked loud laughter from the small group crowded in the room; the sound was a strange, raucous accompaniment to Eiko's and Gill's movement in the next-door sanctuary.

Gill framed the evening with a languid 3-hour body crawl around the edges of the sanctuary. Her head was hidden at the start under a huge silvery globe, as she crouched in the corner of the church altar platform while Boulé danced in the center of the floor. Slowly, almost invisibly, Gill began to ooze her body through the space, rolling and peeling her torso along the floor, up and around carpeted giant stair seating that rings the room. Viewers were no barrier, as she slid among us, sometimes butting up against a thigh, or around feet. The precision of her timing – the circuit took exactly three hours, and marked the beginning and end of the evening – wrapped all of the other performances into its embrace.

The three solos that were most compelling were those of Paz, Vidich, and an especially puckish Koma. Paz performed her elegant dance in the Parrish Hall, as Eiko floated in to become part of the space, a wraith lying on the floor and later, huddling in a corner. Paz's dance was defiant, a vertical dance to Eiko's horizontal body-fold, a warrior to Eiko's passive cowering. Paz's movement was all advancing; like the figurehead of a ship, she flung her arms back as she leaned forward, then raised them and cupped a heel in her hand, a crane pose, all balance and strength. What Eiko brought was the intense quality of her silence, a witness with her own undeniable power. At the end, Paz bowed an obeisance to Eiko. It suited.

Vidich combined body movement, hardware, and art-making in his solo. Into the cramped, dark Priest's Room, Vidich clumped down a winding staircase, tolling his own chimes on a long pipe that might've been an acolyte's banner. When he entered the sparsely lit room, with its few harsh beams and deep shadows, he silently invited viewers to strike the bell-pole before connecting a medieval-looking contraption to his chest. It looked like an instrument of torture, but was a tool allowing him to rest a large chart pad within arms' reach, as he balanced (precariously) on a one-legged stool. He gazed at one viewer at a time, and slashed quick charcoal sketches of our faces, then ripped them off the pad to add to a floor scattered with drawings of other viewers, other performances. The piece evoked time, and mystery, and the connections of place and movement – Vidich's homage to some of Eiko's themes.



It was Koma, Eiko's long-time partner in dance and life, whose work on the chilly stone porch of the church was the most magical. Called "Dancing with my painting and a lion," Koma moved to a tango-inflected score. As he drifted across the stone, his pink shoes scratched through a light covering of delicately textured sand. He danced as if he were alone, a light vaguely-Chaplinesque smile on his face, a combination of pathos and sweetness. As his feet shuffled on the sand, his arms drifted up, at one point also evoking the crane (echoes of movement throughout the church.) After climbing the iron fence to holler to passersby, he came back to dance with the lion -- the stone sentinel guarding the church's door; it was a winning duet, the stern lion and the gentle clown.

The "Precarious II" evening was more than midway through Eiko's Platform month at Danspace. During this period, after an accident at home, Eiko had injured herself, and her right forearm was wrapped in a light cast. Her fragility was highlighted by that rigid protection. As she wended through the church, pausing or skirting the works of the other invited artists, she seemed even stronger, with that damaged limb. Contemporary performance art may live on the edge of the precarious, but Eiko is a reminder of the steel and grit at its center.

Jimena Paz in "Precarious II." Photo © Ian Douglas.

Arturo Vidich in "Precarious II." Photo © Ian Douglas.

Koma in "Precarious II." Photo © Ian Douglas.

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