

PEOPLE | WHY DID YOU LEAVE JAPAN?

Performance artist Eiko Otake is a stranger in New York

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“Move to rest, sleep, and dream. Move to pass time, bloom, and linger.” These are the opening lines of Eiko Otake’s “Delicious Movement Manifesto.” Otake is a multi-award winning, New York-based Asian-American performance artist whose passion for dance began almost 50 years ago at the height of the Tokyo student uprisings in 1968.

The manifesto’s sense of playful freedom, evoked through a clash between action and stillness as integral parts of movement, appears to be a leitmotif in Otake’s life and work as a dancer and choreographer.

Born in post-war Tokyo, under American occupation, her father’s job as a banker required the family to frequently move houses. In total, Otake changed school six times during her elementary education.

When Otake was 6, the family moved to rural Tochigi Prefecture, 150 km north of Tokyo. It was a testing experience on many levels and instilled in Otake the ability to adapt to unknown situations — a first step perhaps toward a life as an artist.

This was the early 1960s, a time when Japan’s transport and communications infrastructure was still in development, television was not yet a dominant cultural medium and differences between regional dialects and traditions seemed more pronounced. A “Tokyo girl” in Tochigi was an oddity, and carried with it a penalty of bullying.

Otake recalls that the experience had given her a first taste of being a “stranger.” She quickly developed coping mechanisms, both away from people, but also in relation to other people.

And this encounter with otherness forms a key part of her identity today: “In both America and Japan, I’m a stranger. But my being a stranger today is by choice. As an artist, a cultural activist and a teacher, I have developed the skills and commitment to being a stranger. I work as a stranger.”

Otake first entered the U.S. in 1976 with a dance production called “White Dance,” created with her partner, Koma. The pair returned to live in the U.S. the following year, and by 1979, had become permanent residents, establishing a home base on West 15th Street in Chelsea, Manhattan.

Forty-one years later, Otake is still part of that immigration process. She says, “I arrived in New York in 1976 as a Japanese, but at this point, I happen to be Japanese and Asian-American, which is an equally strong part of my identity.”

“There’s no question that I grew up in Japan, Japanese is my first language, Japanese culture is in my body, but I always have a very critical viewpoint to that,” she continues. “I am very critical of many of the ways Japanese society and government work, and I’m not at all shy to express that. So, I don’t behave like a Japanese, in either aesthetic or political identifications.”

Otake’s first encounter with dance came in 1968 after quitting her degree in political science at Chuo University in Tokyo. She was involved in the “new left” student uprisings that gripped many of Japan’s universities and high schools between 1967 and 1969. In 1968, she stumbled across a performance of one of Japan’s most revered dancers and choreographers — founder of the *butoh* dance genre, Tatsumi Hijikata.

Otake had been toying with the idea of becoming a journalist while still in university, and had frequently written for school newspapers. This journalistic curiosity pushed her to find out more about this radical new dance form. She visited Hijikata’s studio, Asbestos Hall, in Tokyo’s Meguro Ward, and ended up living and working there for three months.

During that time, Otake met her partner and future collaborator, Koma. The pair learnt basic dance techniques from Hijikata, but found it difficult to fit into the “disciple” system that was still a strong part of performing arts training culture at that time. Instead, they decided to study with another giant in contemporary dance, Hijikata’s former collaborator, Kazuo Ohno.

Ohno is one of the few people Otake refers to as “*sensei*” (master/teacher).

“In Japan, everyone can be called sensei, but to this day, I am very careful not to use that term, because I’m critical of the type of hierarchical thinking it leads to. So instead I tend to use the word ‘*san*’ or ‘*anata*,’ which sometimes raises eyebrows. But with Kazuo Ohno, I have no hesitation in using ‘sensei.’”

Though *butoh* was an important part of her early training, Otake never applies the label to her performance works. Unlike other styles of dance, where there is often a teachable vocabulary of movement or a transferable technique, *butoh* never had that aspect of formalism. From the beginning, Hijikata developed *butoh* as a rejection of prescribed forms of movement.

Consequently, Eiko and Koma’s 47 works between 1972 and 2013 never set out to be, or represent, *butoh*, even though the Hijikata and Ohno influences are strong.

“It might have been easier to fit within that category and tap into its ‘currency’ as the form gained worldwide popularity thanks to international touring companies, such as Sankai Juku. But, as an artist, what’s most crucial is to think independently,” Otake says.

This spirit of independence led Eiko and Koma to make radical shifts in their artistic trajectory. One landmark moment came in 1984 in a performance called “Night Tide.” This was the first of many pieces in which the duet appeared fully naked on stage. The performance is a meditation on human relationships with land, drawing on the anthropomorphic depictions of landscapes found in ancient cultures such as Native American Indian lore. Like the image of mountains drifting on a night tide, Eiko and Koma’s bodies become the different landscapes and species they describe.

Since 2014, Eiko has embarked on a period of solo work that continues to explore the relationship between body and place. In 2014, she presented the first part of a long-running project titled “A Body in Places” with a 12-hour durational performance in Philadelphia’s 30th Street Station. The project has taken her to cities around the world, including to Fukushima in the wake of the March 11, 2011, earthquake, tsunami and nuclear disaster.

Otake's relentless commitment to forging her own path, thinking and moving outside of power structures, not only informs her work, but is also central to her teaching. Over the past 10 years, she has taught a course at Wesleyan University, a liberal arts college in Connecticut, called "Delicious Movement for Forgetting, Remembering, and Uncovering."

Over the coming fortnight, Otake will lead a workshop based on the above course at the University of Tokyo. It is open to people from all walks of life and is an excellent way to experience her artistic vision and practice first hand. For more information, visit bit.ly/eikootakeUoT (<http://bit.ly/eikootakeUoT>).

Profile

Name: Eiko Otake

Profession: Performance artist, choreographer, teacher

Hometown: Tokyo

Key moments in career:

1968: Begins training with Tatsumi Hijikata and later Kazuo Ohno

1976: Moves to the United States

1984: Production of "Night Tides" marks first use of full-body nudity

2006: Starts teaching classes in movement in U.S. universities

2014: Begins large-scale solo project called "Bodies in Places"

Words to live by: "Accountability in art making, political and community engagement, and in relationships with others."

Strengths: "As serious as I am, I can still look at the sky and say, 'Wow, today's a beautiful day!' That's part of survival."

● 尾竹永子

職業: パフォーマンスアーティスト、振付師

出身地: 東京

転機:

1968年 土方巽氏と大野一雄氏の下で 舞踏を学ぶ

1976年 渡米

1984年 エイコ&コマとして裸体作品 Night Tide を発表

2006年 米大学で教鞭をとり始める

2014年 ソロプロジェクトを開始

父親の仕事の関係で小学校を6回も転校した尾竹永子氏は、出身地の東京から栃木県に引っ越した際に初めて味わった「よそ者」としての感覚を今も持ち続けている。米国でも日本でも「よそ者」であり続けることが、アーティスト、活動家、教師としての活動に不可欠だという。1968年、学生運動の最中、大学を中退した尾竹氏は舞踏の創始者である土方巽氏の踊りに出会い、衝撃を受けた。土方氏のスタジオだった「アスベスト館」で3ヵ月間働きながら生活し、のちに「エイコ&コマ」を結成するパートナーのコマこと尾竹隆氏と出会った。2人は大野一雄氏にも師事し、舞踏の影響を強く受けているが、その様式からはあえて一定の距離を置き、1976年からニューヨークに拠点を移し、「エイコ&コマ」として独自の身体表現を追求。ユニットとして数多くの作品を発表してきた。どこにも属さず、独立した「よそ者」として肉体を使った表現活動続ける尾竹氏は、10年前からコネチカット州のウェズリアン大学で講義も行っており、2014年からはソロ活動も精力的に行っている。