

MAGAZINE PERFORMA MAGAZINE



Eiko Otake *A Body On Wall Street*, 2016. Performance view. Photo by William Johnston.

IN CONVERSATION

Eiko Otake with Sarah Wang

Over three Sundays in November, Eiko Otake will perform A Body in Places: The Met Edition from opening to near closing at all three Metropolitan Museum locations—The Met Fifth Avenue, The Met Breuer, and The Met Cloisters. The piece is a durational video, performance, and installation, with Otake choreographing thousands of still photos taken of her in Fukushima, Japan into a video that sits either static or is pushed through the space on a cart for the length of the museum's hours of operation, moving and fracturing images of herself and the landscape of irradiated Fukushima over the architecture of the Met buildings.

I met Otake at her apartment in the Manhattan Plaza, a unique development in Hell's Kitchen providing subsidized housing for performing artists since 1972. Over green tea and watermelon, we discussed her forty-five year career—two of them solo and forty-two as an artistic collaboration with her partner Takashi Koma Otake as Eiko + Koma—being an Asian-American immigrant, why antagonism is important in her work, how to be a nuisance, the aesthetics of misery, and collective shit.

Sarah Wang: How did you conceive of this project in terms of staging a performance at the Met, and using post-nuclear disaster Fukushima as your subject? How did you begin to think about what you wanted to do, or what could be done in this particular space?

Eiko Otake: There are many parts to this question. There's the Met, there are the post-nuclear issues, and there's how I decide on how to perform—how these combinations lead to certain decisions.

I survive on being a performing artist and I wouldn't have thought of the Met as a performance venue. Limor, the Met's general manager of Concerts and Lectures, approached me asking about Eiko + Koma's work, and I told her we are now working as soloists. I described my *A Body in Places* project and she was interested. I started to think, "Oh—what could happen there?"

As an immigrant, I'm a little different from American artists who were born and grew up here. I question certain things or notice I don't have particular things that American people are likely to have. I am not really antagonistic, but... perhaps you understand this from your parents or ancestry too. I don't come from the same cultural base looking toward Europe or visions of America's founding fathers. For an independent artist, the process of immigration never ends. I am still immigrating, noticing the distance between where I come from and where I am now. That is how I observe, think, and work. I come from a very different place. From there the Met looks different. While the Met is "the Met"; in the USA, in New York—it's not my immediate pantheon. I have to find my own way to enter and deal with that otherness, its "Met-ness."

Throughout my career as a performing artist, especially in creating iterations of *A Body in Places*, I always think about how to make it necessary for me to be in the place I'm performing in. I use the word "place" to avoid the abstractness of space, which is usually used for modern and contemporary dance. Even when I used to perform in theaters and museums as Eiko + Koma, I always wanted to treat each site individually. In seeing the site of my performance as a particular place, I can observe, question, and understand some parts of its characteristics. I can seek my own narrative that I don't have to share with audience members. It's been important for me to feel that each performance is

necessary. But that necessity and urgency is almost never there when the first idea or invitation arrives. I was invited to perform at the Met, but this is my policy: I don't want to make this about being here because I was invited. It is my job to make it necessary and urgent for me to be there. That's my creative process. My way to deal with otherness is to bring even more otherness as necessity.

In our first meeting, I asked, "Could I do it at all three Mets?" I looked at the Met from the core idea of *A Body in Places* and the plurality of these places that are connected by a single body, my body. When that idea was accepted, I began thinking about how I could make the performances necessary.

I've gone to Fukushima five times since the nuclear meltdowns. The experiences and memories of being there are something I carry with me. I have tens of thousands of photos of me in Fukushima by William Johnston, my photographer and collaborator. I decided I would bring Fukushima into the Met by projecting photo images and metaphorically "staining the Met wall."

SW: What I'm so interested in, regarding this piece and your work in general, is the antagonistic energy. I know it's not only about antagonism, because that's a binary position, but also this idea—especially of you performing solo now—of insisting upon your female body in the context of a public space. There is a transitory nature to the Met; thousands of people come in and out every day. This transitory space was also an element in your Philadelphia performance, *A Body in a Station*, where in 2014 you staged a series of performances in the often-crowded Amtrak 30th Street Station on consecutive Fridays in October.

EO: Tourists who are arriving don't expect to see me. They're like, "What's going on here? What's wrong with her?"

SW: Also, you're not a white, Western body. You're an Asian body in these places.

EO: And I look miserable because that's my aesthetic. I purposefully want to make sure I look miserable.

SW: Perhaps we can address the idea of discomfort. You've spoken about having a taste for being a nuisance, for disrupting the museum-ness of the institution, and overstaying your welcome. Thinking about the fraught subject of Fukushima and the duration of your performances at the three Mets—which last from the museum's opening until almost closing—what's the significance of this kind of transgression for you?

EO: That's exactly my desire. I have a distaste for keeping it just right. Being just right sometimes means a convenient complicity. In the museum, everything is in a certain place. Everything is supposed to be just right. Pictures have been chosen by experts or by their reputations, by their artistic high-endness. When tourists come to the Met they behave a little differently than when they go to the Macy's or the Empire State Building. In the church—the cathedral—the people behave a little differently. There's an implication: nothing is supposed to be not worthy.

SW: No bad taste. No bad behavior.

EO: But certain art and certain artists questions that. I want the process of that questioning, the labor of that questioning be my art. I'm not a "quiet, charming Asian" [*laughs*]. I come from not only post-war Japan, but also the end of the '60s movement in Japan. Some people are surprised—some still expect a little mystery from me or from where I come from. I've noticed people go, "Oh, you drink beer? Oh, you drink coffee?" as if we come from this mysterious land. Japan has been aestheticized—I'm critical of this whole expectation.

I'm not a Japanese export or a muse. I'm a real person living in New York. Being a contemporary artist does not mean you just live in this world. Being a contemporary artist means you *grapple with* the world. But, grappling takes a little bit of commotion. I like to present a body and mind that is "not quite right." There's a truth, somehow, in "not quite right." I want to be ruled by my own past. In a way, it is making a commitment to a certain aesthetic of misery. I once wrote, "I want to stay miserable." Someone crossed it out and wrote, "vulnerable." He thought I was using the wrong word. I crossed it out his correction and re-wrote, "miserable."

SW: That's the right word.

EO: Every performing artist is vulnerable. It doesn't take determination to be vulnerable. We are all vulnerable, that is how humans and many other species are. But being miserable is a decision and an aesthetic—and the Met is not a place where people go expecting something miserable.

SW: Yes, and this goes along with what we were talking about before regarding antagonism. I really like what you said about insisting upon this kind of otherness—as an immigrant, as a woman, as an artist—and not being apologetic for it.

I'm not impolite, I just like behaving a little differently. And that little difference is important to me.

SW: Absolutely. Decades ago, it was all about immigrants assimilating into the dominant culture, but I'm against assimilation. It's a kind of neo-colonialism, a white-washing. But as a woman and a performer, using your own body also adds another element of refusal, the refusal to blend in or to assimilate.

EO: One of my best postures in my performances is actually this position. [*Eiko demonstrates a squat.*] You're in a position assuming the Asian squat. To squat in this way is to gamble on the street, or to pee.

During my childhood in Japan, most of the houses didn't have a modern toilet. Whenever I give a lecture, I always say my history with the toilet was like this: squatting. I used to watch all the maggots crawling into the shit, because every family does the same shit, right?

SW: You shit in the same place. It's a collective shit.

My history counts. I'm a small person and I like to stay small. I've never wanted to make a big company, a big show. If I am given a choice of two theaters, I've always chosen the smaller theater. I would rather have more performances in smaller theaters than one large one. So at the Met, I'll perform three times. How do I stay small, but still overstay my welcome? How to bring my small insistence into this? I'm not being confrontational—I respect the museums for what they are. I'm not a painting or a photograph.

SW: You're a living body.

EO: I'm a living body—so that has a kind of politics to it. I've been alive for 65 years, which is a part of human history. So I want to encounter the Met's history and my history. In addition, I'm bringing in Fukushima's history and my history being in Fukushima. I've been going to Fukushima for six years. I'm Japanese but that is not a good reason to go to Fukushima repeatedly. Five trips are condensed into a seven and a half hour video played over a day; it's a condensation of my visits to Fukushima, as a part of my life. My history counts, not because I'm Eiko the performance artist, but because I'm a person with my own history of going and seeing the places.

SW: I like thinking about this performance on so many different levels of time, where you're taking the history of Japan and Fukushima and your own history and the Met's history, and you're condensing everything into six-plus hour performances, which in this context seems small. But nonetheless, six hours a day on three consecutive Sundays is a long time for your body to be persisting, and insisting, in the space. All of these different condensed temporal spaces will encounter your slow, protracted movement in these performances. It's also another kind of dilating and expanding of time. I was thinking about the body in this performance as a kind of wormhole through time and space. You will be using not only your body but also a film of Fukushima that that you're dedicating all of your time to editing right now.

EO: You know how Alice in Wonderland is walking and all of a sudden there's a hole? You go into that and there's a whole world down there. My own personal definition of what is art is, is that you see some artwork, and you feel that there is a whole different universe with different logic out there for that art to exist. That artwork is the entry point, the hole into Alice's wonderland. I like that whole different logic. It has its own place.

SW: Where will this hole transport viewers?

EO: To several notions that I've been carrying: Humans fail, and what we make always breaks. It's a matter of time. There is a conceptual mistake I think human beings have—it's beyond whether something survives. The world began without humans and world will end without humans. In that way, it's a sure sense of failing, but failing is a reality rather than something negative. We behave as if nothing should fail, so when something fails, we are surprised. Being lost is important. I was driven for a very long time to make something really, really good. I think as Eiko + Koma, we did some pieces that I'm very proud of. But I feel that failure is just as important. I don't want to be only picking up good stuff. How to grapple with the rest of the world? Another important notion is time is not even and no place is empty. So I can observe particular not-glorious details of time and places.

SW: Can you talk about failure and the value of shit in the context of the images of Fukushima that you will be projecting while performing at the three Mets?

EO: The images of Fukushima are organized by location, and also chronologically over four visits. I'm investigating all these images I've collected over the years through one lens, the projector staining the walls of the Met, how images can function as time dancing, how images make a sense of place, and how I remember the places and the times, and how my body connect these places as an intermediary. I may sleep at the Met. In one instance I could be very attentive, and in another, I might not. Then maybe in one place my movement will be very active, and in another it could be agitated. I might leave the room momentarily. In this way, my presence can activate the galleries of the Met.

People may go away, and I'll still be here. I like the idea of rupturing. Distance almost disappears temporarily or at least making the distance malleable. Conventionally measured distance is not malleable physically. But my relationship, the sense of distance, changes.

Elasticity.

It's important to me. It's not a very logical way of answering your questions.

SW: I don't think, in any case, that logic is the best way in which to speak. The last thing I want to talk about is the concept of "staining the Met" that you mentioned earlier. What does "staining" mean in this context? What does it mean to you conceptually, specifically, using the imagery of Fukushima? Is it about a collective unconscious? Is it about trauma? Is it about remembering memory?

EO: No. It's a dirtiness. Miserableness and dirtiness. Radiation is pollution. To me, bringing Fukushima in to the museum is like bringing in a rotten part of the intestine. It feels wrong, but that rotten intestine is our *collective* intestine. Let's say we're talking and we're very busy. We don't pay much attention. If I do this...*[demonstrates placing something in front of a viewer]*, you will look at this and notice things.

You're placing the rotten intestine in my view.

SW: There's an intentionality here.

EO: It is not like I'm malicious. Projectors are common gadget used by artists, so I decided to make this very long video to make the projection not just another idea but a necessity. While I can't install photos of Fukushima in the museum, the projection is one way that I can insist on these images being there.

SW: You're also insisting on your own will, your own subjectivity, and your own agency as an artist.

EO: To me, it's an important part of being an artist. I'm very grateful that I have the opportunity to do these performances. At the same time, there's something that I want to bring in beyond gratefulness. What I will bring is not quite a nice cake but not a malicious thing. The intentionality and particularness I hope will make the performances necessary and urgent.

***Eiko Otake** is a New York-based interdisciplinary movement artist, performer, and choreographer who has worked as one half of the artistic duo Eiko Koma for more than forty years.*

***Sarah Wang** is a writer based in New York.*