



[Home](#) [About Us](#) [Resources](#) [Networks](#) [Research](#) [Directories](#)

Join the ICONS

Dance ICONS is a global network for choreographers of all levels of experience, nationalities, and genres. We offer a cloud-based platform for knowledge exchange, collaboration, inspiration, and debate. Dance ICONS is based in Washington, D.C., and serves choreographers the world over.

Subscribe today to receive our news and updates. Become a member of *your* global artistic community -- join the ICONS!

[SUBSCRIBE](#)

[ARCHIVES - ICONS INSPIRE](#)

[ARCHIVES - ICONS NEXT STEP](#)

[ARCHIVES - MONTHLY QUESTIONS](#)

[CONTACT US](#)

Eiko Otake: Stillness in Motion, Motion in Stillness



For more than three decades, Eiko and her partner Koma's dance works mined the most elemental life forces -- land, water, and air -- while drilling deep into interior landscapes. Now Eiko is discovering her artistry anew. ICONS spoke with her about her distinctive approach to motion and stillness, fragility and vulnerability of both body and soul, and how she creativity redefines notions of beauty in unexpected ways.

**Dance ICONS:** What inspired you to become a dancer and choreographer and when did you discover that you needed to express yourself physically?

**Eiko Otake:** Throughout my childhood and teenage years, I thought I was going to be a writer. I was always reading. I was not much of a mover. The only way I moved my body was in political demonstrations, which I did a lot [as a student] back in the 1960s. I was in high school in '68. I was busy with political movements and skipped many classes -- I was either reading or on the street. I was reading writers 20 or more years older than me -- the war generation, my parents' generation. They had to go through a lot to survive and many writers I read were naked existentially.

I was a physically incapable person. I was born weak and I was often sick as a child. Typically, I was ill, reading at home, imagining the world. I hated physical education class and skipped a lot of them: I could not run, could not do sports. My mom put me in a modern dance class when I was three because I didn't even walk right. Even though I did modern dance for three years, I was never interested to be a dancing child.

But when I tried to write, I found my life had not given me anything close to that existential hardship [of the older generation]. I was very drawn to existentialism and thought I had to have something of my own, a more existential experience. It was during such search that I saw Tatsumi Hijikata's work. Though I didn't particularly like it, as a journalist wannabe, I was curious: Why the work was so illogical [*sic*]. So I never intended or tried to become a disciple of Hijikata. I was curious and critical. After Koma and I left Hijikata's, we studied with Kazuo Ohno.



Because of this history, people immediately put me in this category of Butoh. While, of course, I studied with them, it was brief and experimental on my end. I brought my literary and journalistic curiosity. As a writer wannabe, I was also trying to find my body and a core.

**ICONS:** What was your artistic or creative impetus?

**EO:** I never had a moment where I said to myself, "I have something special to say." Ohno was amazing in the way that Dalí or Picasso was amazing. He was not an ordinary human being. He was very rare, a mix of many, many unusual elements, a genius. Seeing him up close, I learned very quickly I was not special. But I observed, absorbed. I thought about how to develop myself based on who I was and who I wanted to become.

I never signed up or wanted to become a “Butoh” dancer. I didn’t go to a program or school of Butoh. I just happened to be with those two amazing people, one after the other, who later became known as Butoh artists. At that time, at least for me, they were two individuals. Even though I did not understand and they were not yet well-known at the time, I could see how strange and distinguished these two existential artists were, and for that reason, I was curious.



**ICONS:** Can you discuss your movement style?

**EO:** Let me be a little bit subversive. I don’t think it’s my job to talk about my style. I never set up to create my style. I’m just a working artist. I am still physically not a strong dancer, so I tend to move slowly. I have never been directed or choreographed. I hardly choreographed others either. Eiko & Koma was a two-person dance company, so during our

concerts, we performed either my solo, Koma’s solo, or a duet -- so there’s no reason for us to do this quickly. We may be moving slowly, but the truth is, I’m just trying to take the time I feel necessary.

When we stage a work, we create a place. We become inhabitants of that place, either we go to that place -- a river, the bottom of a tree -- or if we are in a theater, we have a humongous tree in the middle of the stage and what happens is at the bottom of the tree. I am not a tree, but I can sense the tree and the tree is a witness to whatever is there. Then the question becomes more existential. It is not about the style. You think and you end up studying the subject and yourself.

**ICONS:** You don’t typically go into a studio and create as we imagine most choreographers do. You have stated that you do not improvise on stage, so how does a piece grow?

**EO:** No, I don’t improvise. But since I am my own choreographer when I dance alone, nobody’s going to yell at me if I do anything different than I planned. I’m an artist and performer first. The choreography is not that important to me, except for the fact that I cannot do other people’s choreography. I can betray my choreography and when and how I betray becomes the spontaneity of the performance.

For *A Body in Places*, I’m in public spaces, and depending on what’s happening there -- a dog runs into my skirt or many things happen -- that gives a different flow and meaning to [the work]. The street is different at twelve o’clock and five o’clock. That changes my behavior; it charges me differently. Say I’m going to do something on Wall Street in the Morgan Stanley doorway. How do I do it? I go there and it’s already scored and prepared. Of course, if the stairs are so packed that I’m slower than I should be, then I can cut something out if it’s something that I don’t mind cutting.



Whether my right-hand reaches the door or my left-hand reaches the door, or how long I stay there, is really more spontaneous, especially in my solo work. With Eiko & Koma’s work, it was a little more choreographed and practiced.

**ICONS:** You mentioned a score. How do you create the score and is it written?

**EO:** I don’t need to go to an empty studio and create steps. I need to create in the environment or the place. I always try to negotiate with the presenters and ask for as much as two to four weeks to be there, study the place, set it up, and rehearse.

For my 2015 piece in [New York's] Fulton Street subway station, I had to work on the site but they said, "No." So I did a rehearsal in disguise. Every day I worked there and I became a little more friendly with people who worked around there. I ended up rehearsing, but I had to take the necessary steps to make friends first. I can't [score] in day one.

With Eiko & Koma, for *River*, we rehearsed in the river every day for an entire month before the premiere. I studied many rocks in the river, so I would know where my hand goes on the rock. It was dangerous to do a piece in the river, physically dangerous. I had to learn about each river. At one point, we almost drowned when the stream was faster and deeper than the day before.



**ICONS:** Tell us about your new project.

**EO:** My new works are a series of duets. With Eiko & Koma, two could do what one cannot do, like bringing the luggage from A to B – that's easier to do with two. With Koma, we were both very involved in creating every aspect of each work. However, in these new duets, I am creating. I talk about how I encounter different individuals. I meet these artists; some are choreographers, some

not.

I propose that we should try something together with no promise that anything will come out of it. Then we think about what we want to do. With two choreographers -- Jeanine Dunning and Merián Soto -- we taught each other a class. I went back and said it was really great to have that experience. Then I proposed that we could just be together somewhere for 60 minutes. With these invitations, I intend to encounter others a little more deeply, profoundly.

I also made a duet with my grandfather, who died 16 years before I was born. And I performed a duet with poet C.D. Wright, who died soon after our trip together. So those two people are dead; they don't exist physically, but I bring them in the space by video or have a dialogue with them. I have the framework -- I can bring the dead people back. They're dead but the memory's not. The memory has to be reinstated because memory, too, will be lost if we don't feed it. In my grandfather's case, I never knew him, so I am doing research on him.

This summer I will premiere a duet with Beverly McIver at American Dance Festival in North Carolina. She's a painter, so she will paint me. She doesn't want to paint in public, so she will paint me in her studio and I will video her one afternoon. I can perhaps show her painting strokes -- how she constructed my face. In that way, my eyes are looking at her and her painting me is her act of looking at me.



**ICONS:** What would you tell your younger self?

**EO:** I think I carry my young self in me. Having worked with Koma for so long, I tried to be not overtly me. I was committed to Eiko and Koma and I was proud that we were running it together.

After I started doing my solos, for the first time I could be fully me. Also, now when I arrive to a new studio or space alone with a suitcase, I make my own relationships. When the two of us were touring, people left us alone in a room until we had to go out to the public. When I arrive alone, I am more active meeting people. I do guest teaching, I do workshops, I do lectures, I do exhibitions. I do many, many things within a residency. I go out more into the community and meet some incredible artists and activists. So traveling alone I learn more.

Her current Duet Project had its first showing at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in Manhattan in November 2018. This multi-year project will have a premiere at the American Dance Festival in July 2019. Eiko will collaborate with artists in multiple genres across the country, with whom she will re-examine the duet form with new partners.

**Images and art photography in order of appearance from top to bottom:**

Eiko in *A Body in Hong Kong*, by CPAK Studio

Eiko in *A Body at the Moran Plant*, photo by William Johnston

Eiko in *Two Women*, photo by Anna Lee Campbell

Eiko in *A Body in a Library*, photo by Lucile Adam

Eiko in *A Body in Chile*, photo by William Johnston

Eiko in *A Body in Fukushima*, photo by William Johnston

Eiko in *A Body in Indian Point*, photo by William Johnston

Video *A Body in Fukushima* (Momouchi Station 2014), photos by William Johnston, video edited by Eiko Otake

Interviewer: Lisa Traiger

Content Editor: Camilla Acquista

All Rights Reserved: January 2019 © Dance ICONS, Inc.

Stay Connected...

**Who Are We?**

Dance ICONS is a global network for choreographers of all levels of experience, nationalities, and genres. We offer a cloud-based platform for knowledge exchange, collaboration, inspiration, and debate. Dance ICONS is based in Washington, D.C. and serves choreographers the world over.

© 2020 ICONS. All rights reserved. | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Use](#)

Development: [Media4Artists](#)



**ICONS:** Will you and Koma make any new duets?

**EO:** I don't know. There is definitely a possibility; I just am busy right now finding my own voice and traveling to many places. For this duet project, I have to converse with many other artists. Maybe after this project, we might do something together. I haven't really thought that far ahead.

Koma has been very supportive [of my solos and duets]. It does feel quite eye-opening. It is important for me to acknowledge that it means a lot for me to think on my own. I have always been opinionated, but [previously] I had to be considerate. Now I am bolder.

**Video Sample:**

11:46



\*\*\*\*\*

**More About Eiko:** Eiko Otake is a Japanese choreographer/dancer who has lived in New York since 1976. In 1972, she abandoned her studies as a political science major, and with her partner, Koma formed the collaborative performance duo Eiko & Koma. After studying and performing with Japanese master teacher Tatsumi Hijikata, a key Butoh figure, the duo also worked with Kazuo Ohno and studied modern dance in Germany with Manja Chmiel.

Since 2014, Eiko has pursued her own solo projects under the overarching title "A Body in Places." With Koma, for 42 years they created their distinctive brand of dance in theater settings and site-specific locales, including museums, universities, galleries, a graveyard, rivers, parks, and other public settings. The duo has been honored with a 1996 MacArthur Fellowship, a 2004 Samuel H. Scripps American Dance Festival Award, a *Dance Magazine* Award, two "Bessies," a Guggenheim, and two individual Duke Artist Awards.

Eiko began her solo project with a 12-hour performance at 30<sup>th</sup> Street Station in Philadelphia. Since then she has performed variations of "A Body in Places" at more than 40 sites around the world, including Fukushima, Japan, where with photographer and historian William Johnston. A book, *A Body in Fukushima*, will be co-published by Wesleyan University Press and Philadelphia Contemporary.