



Photo: Amie Lee King Eiko Otake stands before a crowd in a traditional kimono with an arm outstretched.

*Some people in Portland might remember seeing Eiko & Koma at Jamison Square 16 years ago on September 11...*

**Laurel McLaughlin (LM):** Welcome back to Portland! Before we delve into the myriad works you're presenting at TBA that encompass numerous themes, practices, and embodiments from your career, could you reflect on *Offering*, the first performance that you presented in Portland with collaborator Koma back in 2003 at TBA?

**Eiko Otake (EO):** I remember the show very well. We created *Offering* in post-9/11 New York and premiered it in 2002 summer, near where the World Trade Center was. We also performed the work in six more parks throughout Manhattan that summer, as well as touring it throughout Poland and other eastern European countries. Then we

came to Portland. As with the other places, we asked PICA to order a mound of dirt, with which we were going to perform a ritual of mourning. Dirt was a metaphor of collective graves. But when we saw the site, Jamison Square, Koma and I wanted to perform in the fountain. The seeping and pulling tides of the water felt meaningful to us. We all come from water and our tears are water too. Water connects not only we humans, but also humans with other beings. The night was chilling with wind, water, and wet fur dresses, and that made some common memories not only for Koma and me but also for many viewers. I was reminded about that by so many people I met during my visit this past spring. It is profound for me to learn that what we did became many common memories for this group of audiences.

**LM:** You're returning to present multiple works during the run of TBA19 including, an exhibition at the Center for Contemporary Art & Culture, PNCA, entitled, *A Body in Places*, curated by Kristan Kennedy and Joseph Scheer, a solo performance in the PNCA galleries on opening night, with a screening at the NorthWest Film Center of *A Body in Fukushima: Reflections on the Nuclear in Everyday Life*; a new three-channel video at PICA; and the TBA performance of *The Duet Project: Distance is Malleable* at PICA as well. Could you talk about presenting these many works and how they relate each other?

**EO:** Because I started to perform professionally at the age of 30, I have a long career. As you know, the most of which—42 years—was as Eiko & Koma. And during these years, Eiko & Koma performed here four times. I have been working as a soloist since 2014 and began the *Duet Project* in 2017. And I have been going to Fukushima through these years. So, instead of showing one recent work, I wanted to share a dialectic trajectory since Eiko & Koma, which is Eiko, “the half” of Eiko & Koma, learning to work alone, and then to also realize she learns in working with others and interested in creating “we” through art making. And my work in Fukushima grounds me in realizing how being human is so fundamentally dangerous, so I also wanted to share that altogether. People can enter to my house from different doors and be with me in different rooms, but can then be motivated to visit another room and thus get to know the whole house of this artist (though I literally do not own a house, even an apartment).

**LM:** The performance, *A Body in Places* (2014), engages with the specificities of place—and I saw part of the 12-hour performance at Philadelphia's 30 Street Station. How does the exhibition of the same name engage with the specificities of place in other sites?

**EO:** Wow you were there! Thank you. That was my debut as a solo performer!! Five years from that debut, this exhibition highlights my solo works in differently significant places: particularly Fukushima (video created from photographs), Hong Kong (prints from photos of the performances at the very site the umbrella revolution took place a year ago and thousands of people camped out to protest and block seven-lane highways), and Alfred (New York, where I danced with countless number of the moths and collaborated with a few artists). These can be seen as artifacts, created from archives of my solo performances; but these can also be seen as collaborations of different kind—*A Body in Fukushima*, is a collaboration with a photographer and the irradiated landscape, *A Body in Hong Kong* is a work that would not have happened without a particular presenter/curator and a massive, historical event, and *A Body in Alfred*, is the result of my newfound eagerness to seize upon possibilities of encounter, in this case with a moth specialist, printmakers, and videographers—all the members of IEA (Institute for Electronic Arts)—so they also belong to my duet projects. All of these works might look like solos; but in fact, in my long history as Eiko & Koma, I have been trained as a collaborator, so these works in the exhibition illuminate that a solo is a duet with someone whose body is not necessarily seen.





Photo: Amie Lee King  
Eiko Otake stands on the second floor with a large piece of red fabric hanging over the railing down into the atrium.

**LM:** Turning towards how you've used movement in the past, which might have bearing on these upcoming works, you said in a previous interview: "[I am using my body as a constant.](#)" Yet, your work inhabits many spaces that are mobile—sometimes within neoliberal structures, such as a train station, sometimes with eroding landscapes, like in Fukushima. So, how do the concepts of "constant" and mobility co-exist in your work?

**EO:** I can also rephrase the quote as "I want to use my body as a conduit," or "I want to present my body as recognizably, intentionally, and aesthetically the same person... oh that is Eiko (a name here is not important), a body of the same person, a mind of the same person, who goes to Fukushima, who is in front of a viewer in Place A, who performed in place B how many days ago, and where another viewer saw her. This performer might be at first very strange, as she looks so miserable, but in time, she becomes familiar and her audience breathes her miserableness. Then through watching her body, a viewer can not only see this place but can IMAGINE other places." So, yes, we are all sort of mobile compared to trees and mountains (and they too are of course moving); but at the same time, I feel intentionality of performing makes dancer's body familiar and willing, not only connecting the mind of an artist and that of a viewer but also the pains and beauties and dangers of places. And that willingness does not have to take a shape of strength. If anything, I want the inner strength in the bodies that are compromised, hurt, and in pain. I want to honor the gaze and the sense of constant with a body as it moves toward non-existence, which we all do in slightly different speeds. A body has autonomy and decision making even if it is in small ways. So, my use of constant is a life with its movement.

**LM:** Could you share more about the solo that you'll be performing at the PNCA galleries?

**EO:** My solo at PNCA is to activate the exhibition and leaving some mental traces into the space. I make visual arts and media works from a point of being a performer. I also use my performance to make an event for people to gather. Not only might there be some people who come to the gallery because I am performing but, hopefully that is not the only time they see the exhibit. In fact, I sincerely hope, and I will say this at the opening, each viewer will come back to the exhibit, to be alone and to really see what I, the curators, and collaborators are presenting.

**LM:** The exhibition at PNCA will also feature a screening of *A Body in Fukushima* (2014–2017), which, in some iterations, features photographs by Japanese historian and artist William Johnston, that you edited, and a performance. Could you describe your dialogue with the landscape of Fukushima, and then the post-production process of editing the photographs?

**EO:** I conceived the project *A Body in Fukushima* as a photo exhibition that would tour with my solo performances, *A Body in Places*. While I was conceiving the solo work to be premiered at Philadelphia Station, I thought I would like to bring with me very different stations from the splendor and business of the Philadelphia Station. But even in our first visit, it became clear Fukushima is the subject itself, a large complication, an inevitable human failure and not a subject to be avoided.

And Fukushima includes many Fukushimas. There are many places within Fukushima that have varying degrees of radiation, history, and ways of life. So again, I present my body as a visitor, as a conduit between the places I performed within in the U.S. and the places I performed in Fukushima. I also felt, though I am an outsider visiting Fukushima. I am still a part of humans who assault environment and other species. It is a bit confusing, but nature looks more vibrant and powerful in the time and places in which people were gone. That does not mean they are not irradiated. Irradiated, but the things continue to grow and blossom. And, unlike humans, trees and mountains cannot walk away.

Yes, the films and photos I show become a performance, in the way that they are presented to the audience and each viewer can take what they want. This is particularly the case about my dancing in Fukushima. I cannot not bring audiences there, so I need to bring my performances there to audiences far from Fukushima. And editing is like a choreography I do for the performance. It is a preparation of a performance. For me, neither choreography nor editing is a performance. Presenting it with intention and how people see it is the performance. So, as a performing artist, I offer that and for that reason I prepare by choreographing the photos, designing and creating sound and most importantly the film uses words. This is the first time I used words in my media works. That was challenging and I wanted to create a style that weaves words, visuals, body, and time. The words I chose are important to me and hopefully people also feel that the words have been carefully selected, composed, and timed.

I consider my Fukushima work as my later work, and so are my solos and the *Duet Project*. Not only did these come later than Eiko & Koma, but they reflect that I am in a later period of my own life. I try to grapple with that and find ways to work. In one sense, it is my regrets that drive me to work; but the irony is the more I work I also find more regrets, so I have been even more driven.

Certainly, I would not have done this if I were younger, when our children were young and we were creating many large-scale theater productions. It would also have been different if I were younger and dancing in Fukushima. There are so many photographs of young women standing in front of the ruins... The fact that I am now 67 years old takes into account my being in Fukushima and in people seeing me in Fukushima.

When I dance in Fukushima, I do not represent the people who were forced to leave. They have their own voices. In dancing there, I think of their ancestors who lived there many decades ago as well as other species, trees, mountains and sea. Land and sea are contaminated but they are... oddly beautiful after the people were gone, however irradiated... This is not to say I have any positive opinion on nuclear matters, however.

**LM:** *A Body in Fukushima*, as with many of your other works, strikes me as pointedly urgent. But it references recent and *difficult* history, one society doesn't want to face, with regard to environmental awareness. But you nevertheless improvised and danced in the evacuated and devastated terrain of the Fukushima nuclear disaster at the Daiichi plant in the town of Okuma. Part of this zone is referred to in Japanese as the "zone that is difficult to return to" (帰還困難区域)— during five different trips to the site with collaborator William Johnston. [The resulting photographs](#), register these affects of urgency and difficult return, and I'm hoping you can speak more about this.

**EO:** These photos have ranges of different urgencies. First, nuclear matter is urgently dangerous and morally wrong. I feel strongly about that. Nuclear power is a Pandora's box. So, being so close to the site of the meltdown is itself a highly emotional experience. Radiation does not have color or smell. So, the knowledge of high radiation is unsettling and upsetting. And I know I should not be there too long and I should not put my body in that exposure. All of these concerns make me move more urgently, faster in some cases, more intensely in other cases. Often upon arrival to a place, I am first muted. Then I begin to observe and make notes. Then I begin to dance. Sometimes it is minimum movement, and other times I move faster for longer distances, in ways I never have done on stage. This is a lot to do with the fact I am in dangerous places and I am emotionally exhausted. I also return to the same place to notice the changes and sense of the time passed... so I return to Fukushima to notice more, to breathe more, to think more...

**LM:** A new three-channel video work will be on view at PICA during your performance, *The Duet Project: Distance is Malleable* for TBA. How will these two works interact in the same space?

**EO:** I am actually not sure yet how and if they will be continuously shown. The important part of this new *Duet Project* is upon arriving in the space, I redesign the contents and how contents are placed and sectioned. So yes, I hope I can keep the media works but I cannot promise. The good thing is I am the director so I can always betray my past decisions and plans...

**LM:** And how would you characterize your *Duet Project*— what was your intention for creating the work?

**EO:** I work with a diverse group of artists, living and dead. Collaborators come from different places, times, disciplines, and concerns. Together, we try to maximize the potentials of our various encounters so as to reaffirm that distance is indeed malleable.

*The Duet Project* does not result in a set work that tours in the same shape after its premiere in July at the American Dance Festival. As is the case at PICA, future performances of this project will be designed specifically for the performance site and community that the project travels to. Not every artist I had an "encounter" with has become a named collaborator, nor will I share with the public every duet that I experiment with. Every encounter, however, regardless of outcome, allows me to live my life with the concept of *The Duet Project*. I learn a lot from each of the encounters, even when such experiences do not lead to actually having a duet I bring to the audience. And some learning can apply to how I can process the next encounter. This endeavor is as much about conversation as it is about self-curation, developing instincts, desires, strategies, and tools for encounters with or without words. It is also about developing urges, hesitations, and resistance by looking at each other and taking time. Being physically and mindfully together is memory making. Every encounter is to affirm living and also to prepare for one's inevitable leaving. My body is always leaning forward to the next encounter.

**LM:** Keeping with that particular work, *The Duet Project* activates a "practice" of dying, that's manifested in your body and outside of it with your collaborators. How does this practice evolve, especially as sometimes death is thought of as an end?

**EO:** Not many people enjoy thinking about death. But it is a fact and one of the few common, equal realities we have. One can die a difficult death or a relatively good death. And while one can die alone, I also saw it is often helpful to have a help in dying. When I say I practice dying I, I mean I can imagine dying as an inevitable destiny. Though I love living. But when I work with, and become friends with younger artists, and have honest conversations, I recognize deeply that I should go first. Let us keep the order. So, working with younger people is one way to practice/imagine dying.

**LM:** *The Duet Project* performance also conjures a juxtaposition between eternal stillness and the movement that is the world. How do you see these two impulses unfolding?

**EO:** In my work, as it is performed, there is no stillness. There might be relative stillness. That is relative... and yes, the world is moving and in that way I feel a bit panicky. So, through not being still, I use certain movements, might be impossible to be recognized as movement, to calm myself down so I can observe and think... both are the reality and every life is moving toward non-existence. The problem is some of us, and humans as a whole, make tremendous damage in the process of disappearing.