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CRITIC'S PICK

Review: In This Dance, Death Is Out in the Open

Eiko Otake's performance at Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn honored the ghosts in our midst.

By Siobhan Burke

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A Body in a Cemetery NYT Critic's Pick

Over the past couple of months in New York City, some dance artists have braved the process of presenting live performance outdoors. Like most social rituals these days, going to a show, even in the open air, involves a whole new set of behaviors. As you choose where to sit, you try not to encroach on anyone's six-foot radius. You do your best to make small talk through masks, reading facial expressions from the bridge of the nose up.

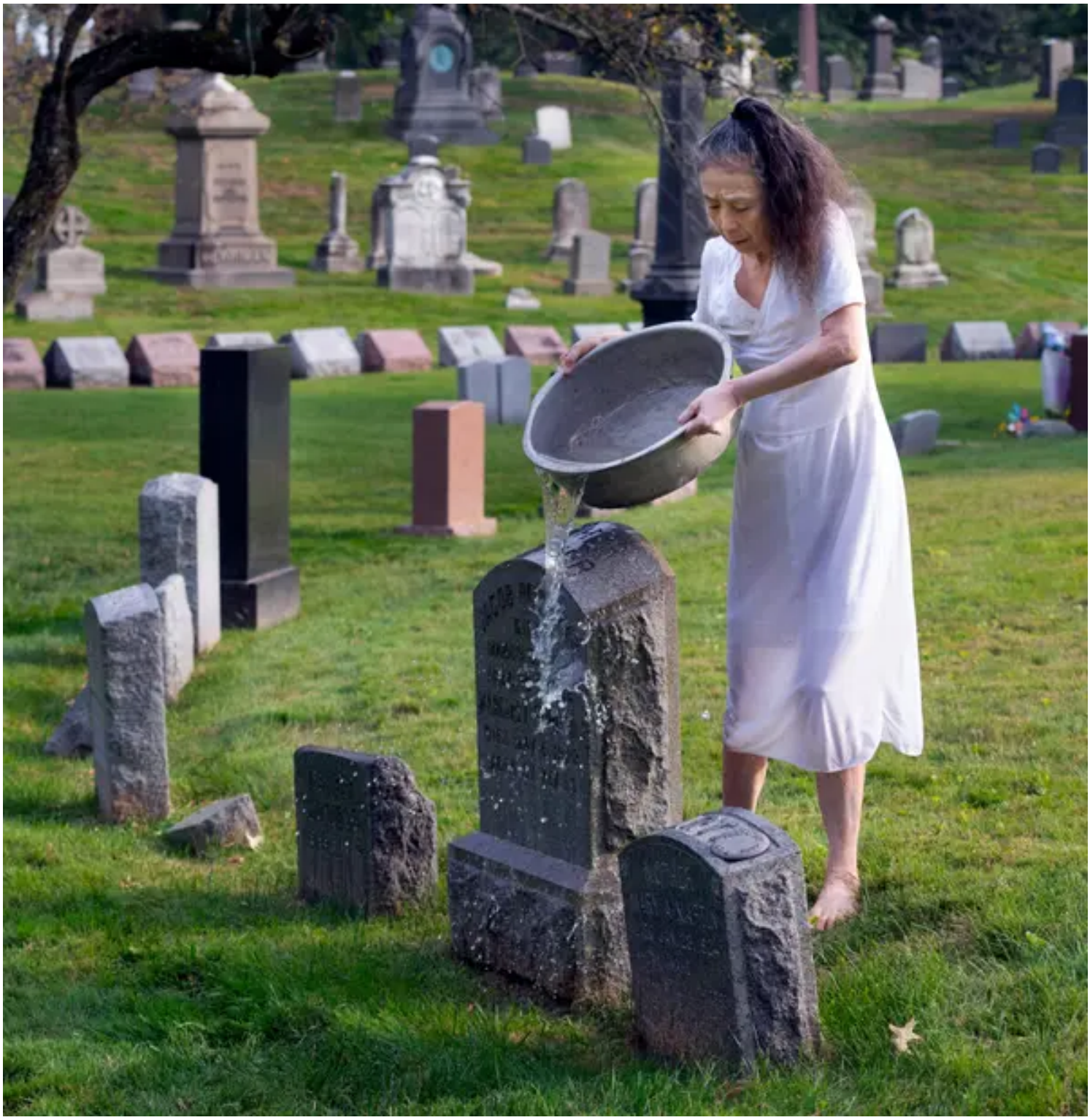
Under these circumstances, it's hard to sit back and immerse yourself in another world. Even to try can feel like a form of forgetting, or denial.

We are, after all, taking these precautions against a backdrop of enormous loss, to prevent loss of an even greater scale. Pretending otherwise takes its psychological toll. And so I found myself overcome with relief, on Saturday evening, to be at Green-Wood Cemetery, in Brooklyn, where I wouldn't have to look away from loss. At Eiko Otake's "A Body in a Cemetery," death was out in the open.

“A Body in a Cemetery” was the latest in her series “A Body in Places,” which has included solos in Fukushima, Japan, and in Lower Manhattan near the World Trade Center. Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

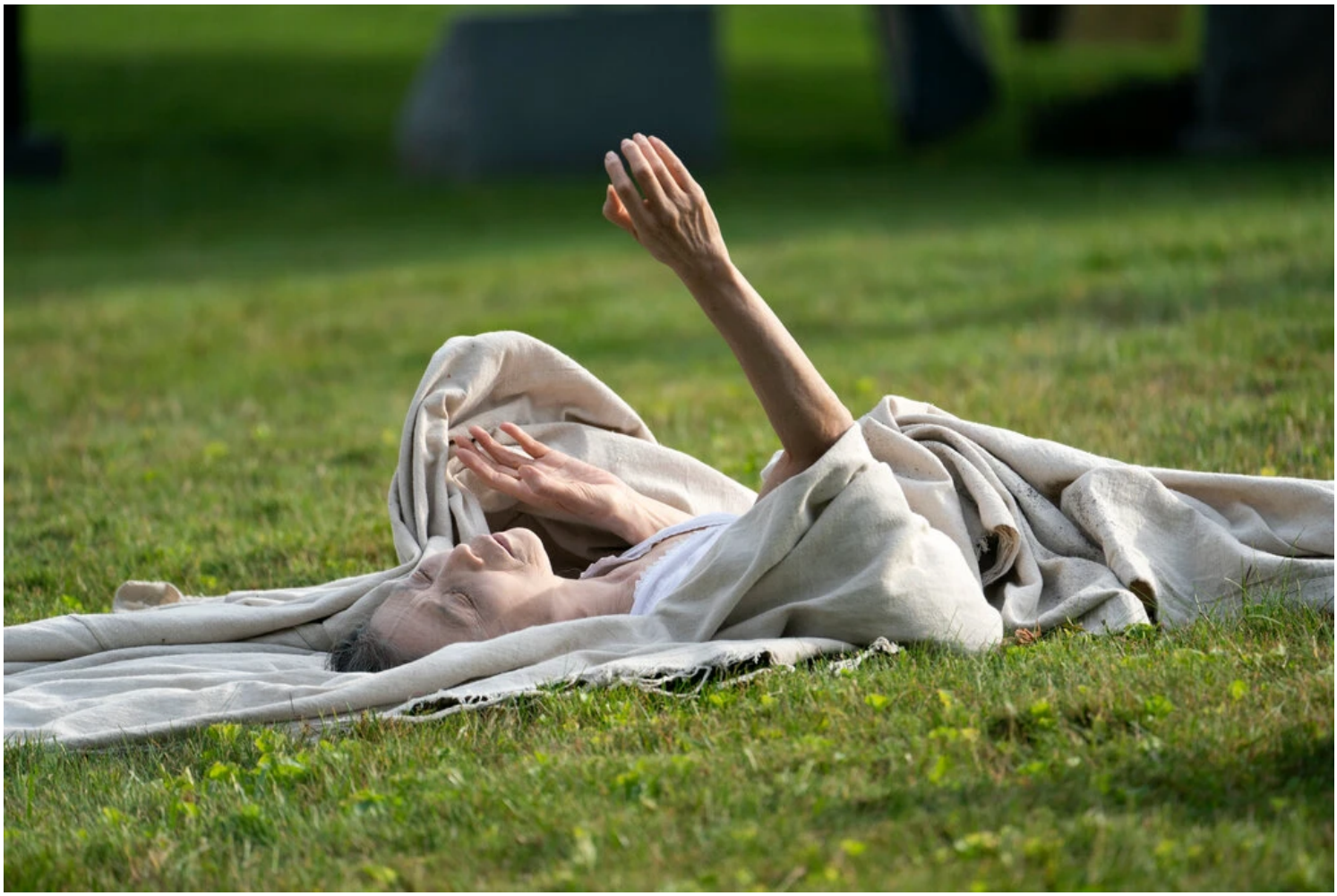
The brief and cathartic solo performance, presented with Pioneer Works, was the latest in Ms. Otake’s meditative series “A Body in Places,” a collection of site-specific solos that have taken this venerable artist from Fukushima to Fulton Street Station in Lower Manhattan, not far from where the World Trade Center’s twin towers once stood. Ms. Otake, who was born in Japan and has lived in New York since 1976, often goes where death has been, attuned to the histories, however painful, of her chosen place. In the program for “A Body in a Cemetery,” she writes, “with us are the dead from past centuries, including many whose graves were never built, and the land that precedes us all.”

In much of her work, the fragile force of Ms. Otake’s presence seems to alter the passage of time. On Saturday at dusk, as soon as she appeared on the edge of Cedar Dell — an expansive circular space ringed with gravestones, some of which date as far back as the 18th century — everything seemed to slow down. Watching her measured, staccato steps toward the hillside where the audience sat, I became hyper-aware of sounds punctuating the silence: the rustling of leaves, a distant siren, squawking birds. Life, as much as death, was all around us.



Tending the dead. Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Ms. Otake's minimal, deliberate actions also pointed toward the continuity of the living and the dead. As she sprawled in her white dress across a white blanket, wrapping it around her, or lowered her spectral frame onto a mound of dirt, she came as close as one could to merging with the earth. As she tended to tombstones, wiping them with tattered cloths or splashing them with water from a metal bucket, she called to mind the care of a gardener and the shudders of a body wracked with grief.



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Honoring the ghosts in our midst, Ms. Otake also honored those who were physically present. When she began to walk back toward where she had entered, in the light of the setting sun, I thought she would simply disappear over the horizon. But from that faraway place, she paused and bowed, to warm applause. For the first time in a long time, I felt comfort in the return of a familiar ritual.

A version of this article appears in print on , Section C, Page 2 of the New York edition with the headline: Here, Death Is Out in the Open