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Art Performs Life on the 10th Anniversary of the Fukushima Disaster

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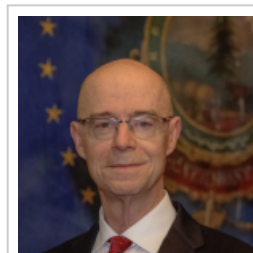
Ten years ago, on March 11, 2011, Japan's Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plants suffered massive damage in the wake of an earthquake and tsunami.

A dance artist, Eiko Otake, long familiar to audiences at the Flynn Center in Burlington, Vermont where I live, felt compelled to perform in the irradiated disrupted landscapes. "By placing my body in these places," she says, "I thought of the generations of people who used to live there. I danced so as not to forget."

Joining her was a colleague from Wesleyan University, William Johnston, professor of Japanese history. The two co-teach a class on Japan's nuclear disasters, with Fukushima now added into the curriculum along with Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Johnston, also an esteemed photographer, journeyed along to document Eiko's performances as an artistic collaborator.

Since their first visit in 2014, they returned four more times to Fukushima—Eiko embodied in the desolate detritus with Johnston photographing. In commemoration of the 10th anniversary of this nuclear tragedy, Wesleyan University Press is publishing a sumptuous catalogue, "A Body in Fukushima," featuring 160 photographs and elucidating essays about this remarkable collaborative project.

Eiko's performative gestures are captured in opulent compositional detail as she defiantly inserts her body amidst crumbled buildings, vine-encrusted train tracks, large bags of radioactive trash, upended cars, tender memorial altars, washed-away fields, crushed fishing ports, and abandoned beaches. Over the course of



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Dance artist Eiko Otake in an image from “A Body in Fukushima.” Photo by William Johnston used with permission. Description: A dancer dressed in white waves a large red cloth in the air in front of a concrete wall adorned with spray painted graffiti written in Japanese characters.

the collaborator’s five trips, nature’s resiliency is revealed as Eiko inhabits regenerating (while still contaminated) gardens, fields and forests in her traditional kimonos, red silks, and futons now tattered and torn. The profane is made sacred in these quietly alluring photographs.

Johnston’s goal “in making photographs with Eiko is to give that experience to others. There were many places where we felt overwhelmed, isolated, crushed, drowned, helpless, utterly miserable.” And for Eiko, “‘A Body in Fukushima’ is a letter to the future, about what we witnessed, what we do not want to forget, and what we do not want to be forgotten. When I go to Fukushima, my distance to Fukushima changes even after I return. Seeing me in these pictures, I hope the reader’s sense of their own distance to Fukushima might also change.”

Eiko last performed in Burlington in 2016 in an outdoor event lakeside by the shuttered Moran coal plant, juxtaposing industrial toxicity with the fragility of nature—a transformative evanescent experience inviting the audience to understand the site anew as she explored elements of solitude, tenacity, and survival.

“A Body in Fukushima” continues along this aesthetic trajectory. Art performs life in this luminous art book project, reminding us that the role artists play in commemorating losses can never be underestimated. Art is indeed where hope lives.

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