

CHAPTER 14

A Dancer behind the Lens

Eiko Otake

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Husk (1987) 9 min 38 sec
Excerpt 3 min 55 sec

Koma and I had rarely been interested in looking at ourselves on video—until 1983, when we started producing our own “media dance.” Through actual hands-on involvement, we each have developed taste and gained knowledge specific to the medium, while still holding on to our reservations about “preserving” dance. We make media work not to record, but to investigate.

When video recording first became widely available in the dance field, Koma and I were, at best, indifferent to the medium. Although various performing venues have recorded our performances for their archives, we rarely looked at them, and then only if we felt it might be useful to make notes for ourselves.

We do not care to see our performance footage; it depresses us. Recorded on video, our dance generally looks dull because it is so slow. In a theater, I believe, the slowness allows us to breathe the space and develop a particular relationship with the audience, but on video, it just looks slow. What happens on stage is only half of what happens in a theater: audiences complete the work by receiving and reacting to it, and that relationship is impossible to record on videotape. In addition, the stage lighting, which is an important part of our work, does not translate onto video. A camera cannot see what a human can see, and therefore, filming needs special considerations.

EARLY LEARNING

We collaborated with Celia Ipiotis and Jeff Bush of Arc Video on *Tentacle* (1983) and *Bone Dream* (1985). We also have worked closely with James Byrne on *Elegy* (1984) and *Undertow* (1988). Early on, we understood that in order to be effective, we needed to choreograph a dance specifically for the camera. Realizing that video is inherently flat while dance is three-dimensional, we looked for ways to make a composition that emphasized depth.

We also examined various editing methods and discovered that our movement becomes less convincing when we produce a skillful edit. Picking up interesting scenes and connecting them makes the dance feel more arbitrary. A “cut-and-paste” method is often intrusive and too contrived for our slow movement. Furthermore, a high-tech look seems to deprive the audience of the immediacy



Eiko & Koma in *Breath*. Videotape Producer, Dance Division, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations, 1999. Choreography by Eiko and Koma. Videography by Jerry Pantzer.



and the flow of the movement. A television viewer may be willing to give us less time than a member of the theater audience, but we hope to bring to video a sense of shared endurance similar to that in a theater, where the audience members are personally involved and, we hope, feel invested and rewarded. In order to achieve that, we searched for a way to employ an uninterrupted long take that is kinetically and visually satisfactory.

A composition integrating two mediums is a delicate balancing act. When the camera's movement and our movement do not relate, the result appears uninteresting. For example, when the camera moves too quickly, we as subjects become "tame" and lose our integrity. On the other hand, when Koma and I exhibit movement while the camera is too passive, viewers are left detached, and the choreography loses impact. To be effective, we had to feel each other and place ourselves "just right" in that particular square while the camera moved on us. In other words, the camera and our body movement should complement each other.

However, when "just right" is too tight, the relationship between camera and body can become overly intimate, like a very exclusive duet. Then a viewer loses her own entry point. Even though we realize that viewers' capacity to feel something profound is dictated by what they see in a frame, we do not want to control totally what a viewer would taste, nor spoon-feed calculated nuances to a wide range of spectators. There has to be breathing room for everyone. Better

In many parts of Asia, how people live their lives has radically changed in recent years. In Japan, for example, many customs that I remember from my childhood, such as all family members sleeping together in one room on a tatami mat, are no longer practiced. Nowadays, modern Japanese may likely live in a house complete with Western-style bathroom and bedroom. However, though they may physically live life not as differently from the West as they did in the past, I think people still carry their formed cultural viewpoint through generations. We, at least, do. I am not sure, though, if younger generations who have grown up in the modern way would actually feel and see the way we old-timers do. I feel more compelled, therefore, to speak from our viewpoint.

—E. O.

yet, if what is in the frame can suggest what is outside of the frame and relate to it, viewers can sense that what they see is a part of a larger world. They may focus, but they are not bound.

The biggest argument we have had with videographers was about how low the camera should sit. For producing *Wallow* (a 1984 video adaptation from our stage work *Fur Seal*), we wanted the camera low, at the height from which seals see the world. Such an angle, we thought, would involve the audience in a sympathetic relationship with us, the performers as seals. However, the cameraman could not comply. It was physically difficult to shoot from such an angle. Westerners in general do not view the world from a low angle as we Asians do because they do not live, eat, or sleep on the floor; they sit high, and they die on a bed (see sidebar). Thus, it was often difficult for them to understand our insistence. The camera angle has been important for all our media works, because it is the viewpoint that frames the story. Later, this issue prompted us to operate the camera ourselves.

Husk 8

In 1987, Koma and I received a Dance/Film/Video grant from the Dance Program of the National Endowment for the Arts to create our own media work. Considering our early experiences, we knew what we wanted: *Husk*, a ten-minute piece requiring no post-production. We wanted to express the intricate relationship between the camera and a body that speaks the primal myths: a body as a breathing landscape. We used an inexpensive camera for unrestricted exploration through playback, and to “choreograph” a piece. Then we rented broadcast quality equipment for the final shoot. This time, our ambition was not to hire a camera operator but for Koma to become one. In this way, we put our acquired knowledge to the test.

It took a while for each of us to get used to our new roles: Eiko as a solo performer and Koma as a cameraman, with both of us co-directing the process—a different kind of duet. We had technical problems to solve. We knew that a handheld camera almost always produces a slight jerk when used for a long shot. That was difficult even for Jeff, Celia, and James, who were used to handling the equipment. We had to find a way for Koma, a novice, to move a camera smoothly and imperceptibly. The other challenge was how to place the camera at an extremely low angle, so it would “crawl” on the floor. The lowest point of the tripod was still too high for that.

Our answer was using a tennis ball to replace the tripod. Koma had tried dollies, turntables, and laying the camera on many different-sized balls. He found that a tennis ball had the right height and the most reliable texture. He himself lay flat on the floor, something that was hard for other cameramen to do. With a bit of practice, the camera rotated, slid, panned, and moved ever so gently, but not mechanically.

In order for me to see how I was being seen, we placed monitors in different places outside of the camera frame during the recording. Thus, I could watch a monitor without facing the camera. When I saw that my face was not in a frame, I could even talk to Koma while he was videotaping. (I was probably yelling, while Koma was so concentrated on the camera that he could hardly breathe or talk.) So, instead of a video person directing or giving information, I, a dancer, was commenting and directing the camera’s moves. This method gave us control of composition and timing so that we could record longer phrases. Because I did not have to rely on directions from anybody else, I could focus on keeping my

movement spontaneous and nonchalant within a comfortable frame. We took three months to finish the piece. We mixed our own music, using the sounds of wind, insects, and a mountain stream. In a gentle wind that blew leaves and my hair, the costume, made out of leaves, revealed and concealed my bare skin.

Undertow

In 1988, the Walker Art Center commissioned another collaboration with James Byrne. With him, Koma and I wanted to do something we could not do by ourselves. The three of us reflected upon our previous collaboration on *Lament* and decided to find more unconventional camera positions that would contribute dramatically to the content of the work.

Heavy editing was necessary in *Lament* because of its lack of continuous takes. The piece required an expensive theater space; therefore, we could not constructively use a playback mechanism. This time, however, we budgeted for much experimental shooting. We shot and looked and then decided that the camera, with James on a ladder, should sway above us. We cut the side light sharply at knee height to create blackness from which Koma and I emerge and into which we sink back. We used the shortcoming of video—the fact that a camera cannot see what humans can see—to our advantage. The result was the unsettling *Undertow* (1988), in which the camera-eye and all the subjects sway. Because of the camera's floating motion, James had to hold it away from the ladder at times, which meant that he could no longer look into the viewfinder. The three of us relied on monitors to know each other's whereabouts. We composed and performed three uncut sections. Later, we connected them by simply fading in and out of darkness. Thus, the piece floated in both space and time as if coming from and going back to a void. The following year, *Undertow* was nationally aired on PBS as a segment of *Alive from Off Center*.

INSTALLATION: *BREATH*

In 1998, the video and film department of the Whitney Museum commissioned our four-week living installation, *Breath*, using video/film components. The curator, Matthew Yokobosky, suggested that Koma and I be physically on display during all hours that the museum was open. This was our first such attempt, and we were apprehensive about how the closed space would affect our psyches. We thought we would miss the sky and more expansive landscapes. We wanted to have a window to connect us to the outside, and we wanted the whole room moving and breathing, so we created an extensive organic environment in which numerous fans and lighting equipment were hidden from the spectators. Breezes both moved the set itself and changed the rays of light, as one sees the sunlight through tree branches in the woods. Along with the environment, we produced three hours of edited video that were incorporated into the installation. The images were all of our body parts. Shot with extreme back light, they looked like mountains and hills undulating sensually, both familiar and mythical. We found that, for the effects we needed, the cheapest home video equipment operated better with low light, because we were not looking for a realistic body image and we wanted to avoid details. I videotaped Koma; Koma videotaped me. Our recording camera was connected to a projector that showed huge images (which both of us could watch) onto the blackened back wall. Thus, we were seeing what we would be using in the installation. Each of us danced gently, seeing the shadow of our own landscape appear and disappear, as the other one zoomed in and panned.

I edited the footage for three simultaneously operating projectors. We constructed curved extensions at the corners of the gallery so that there were no straight lines or angles in the projection surface, and we painted all the walls black. The projectors were then aimed at different parts of the wall in different-sized images. By setting the projectors at their lowest level of brightness, intensity, and color, we succeeded in blurring video's characteristic borders. The three images sometimes merged into one and separated again. There was an elusive merging of landscape, body, cloud, and abstraction. Over time, we covered most of the walls with floating video images. However, only a portion of the audience realized that what they were seeing was a video because the images' deliberate vagueness became a part of the atmosphere. After all, in conventional use, when a video is off or when a video is projecting no image, there usually remains a monitor or a visible projected square. In our case, the occasional absence of video images created a black void that presented itself powerfully. The images became a mirage, and also a window to connect us visually to the landscape of the larger world. Because of the long hours, we took turns in the installation so one of us could see the exhibit from the audience's vantage point—Eiko seeing Koma dancing a duet with his or Eiko's body landscape as the video image shadowed or enveloped him, and vice versa. Often the room was so dark that people could see what was really happening only after their eyes adjusted. Only then did they realize that the videos were body parts meant both to mirror and to support our performers' bodies.

Documenting Breath

With funds from NIPAD (National Initiative to Preserve America's Dance), the Dance Division of the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts produced a video documentation of the Whitney installation. The producer, Madeleine Nichols, curator of the Dance Division, suggested Jerry Pantzer as our videographer, and we agreed. She encouraged us to think creatively for this archival document because the installation was quite different from other performances they had recorded. Jerry came to see the installation, loved it, and returned often, spending many hours in the gallery. The Dance Division supplied us with sophisticated equipment for recording: a Sony BVW 600 Betacam SP Videocamera, Chapman Super Peewee Dolly, and trucks. This machinery takes a long time to set up, but we had professional crews, which made this different from our previous productions. When at last the taping started, we had to go with our mutual instincts because shooting time was limited. The installation, unlike our stage work, did not have clear choreography: we were performing seven hours a day for four weeks. We wanted this video to be a crystallized impression of the installation.

All the original footage (more than four hours) was input to the AVID, and a timeline was prepared. We had been promised that we, as choreographers, would be involved with the editing. Even for Jerry, the use of the AVID Xpress was new, so François Bernadi, an editor, taught us how to handle some of the differences between analog and digital editing. In analog, many of the effects are instantaneous, while with the AVID, one has to render them, which takes time. But for accessing different points in a sequence, the AVID is very fast, making analog seem sluggish. When designing an effect, the AVID will give a 5-second demonstration without rendering, so it is a great tool for experimenting before composing an edit. Since the library purchased the AVID, we had no time constraint.

Jerry and I spent much time selecting footage and making marks on the AVID. This equipment is truly amazing and super-fast, like a word processor and more. We can cut, paste, merge, and print as we go along without ever rewinding a tape. The AVID can slow motion, reverse the footage, change color, and superimpose at our command. It was especially gratifying that we could see all our ideas and then make a decision without having to negotiate prices just to see the choices. I learned how to operate AVID alone so I could spend many hours composing and watching the selection.

Jerry worked hard to please me, but as we continued, I realized that his cinematic training was informing his choices. For me, this cinematic approach had too many phrases, each running for too short a time, to develop a kinetic drama. I saw that his masterful editing had its own flow. I liked it at first, but not at a subsequent viewing. The more I looked at his edit, the more clearly I felt it was not my editing. The body and environment were Eiko and Koma, but the time sense of the editing was not. I thought that in his beautiful edit, we became “beautifully shot” dancers, not the artists who were responsible for the concept. Koma and I conceived and executed the environment, inhabited it, and moved in it. Therefore, I thought, we could ask the viewers to trust us and to stay with us for a while. After some discussion with Jan Schmidt, production specialist of the Dance Division, Jerry and I decided to make two different versions: one for Eiko and Koma, and one for Jerry. At the library’s public showing, we presented two different versions, and each of us spoke about the reasoning behind our aesthetic choices.

Titled *Breath* (1999), our version of this 15-minute video in many ways shows where we are now. We have held onto what we believe is essential: quiet breathing, kinetic communication, and an enduring relationship to the environment and time. However, we are no longer resistant to adventurous camera work, sophisticated tools, and elaborate editing, as long as we can decide how to use or ignore them. *Breath* crescendoes into a 7-minute uncut segment of our duet, scored but not choreographed tightly. This segment was the occasion of our biggest dispute. Although Jerry understood that Koma and I need an unconventional amount of time to involve a viewer with our bodies, he felt that the uncut phrase was much too long and not cinematic or theatrical. Nevertheless, Jerry agrees that this untreated section is a truthful rendering of what we do in performance. This collaboration gave us much to discover and reflect upon.

FILM AND VIDEO

Having created seven dance videos, we show them at public events as a part of our touring residency programs. We give videos away as souvenirs to workshop participants. While we appreciate the convenience of video format—easy to carry and affordable to produce—we recognize that on a screen we, as performers, have either to compete for viewers’ attention or to be patient with their inattention. We have now transferred all our videos onto 16mm film, making them intentionally higher-contrast—with positive results. These films give us “black” that we never get in video. Films also open up other venues in which to present our work. They have been shown on gigantic screens in libraries, in prisons, and on college campuses. Koma and I dislike television monitors, probably because, in Japan, television was a rarity until we were in our teens. We therefore tend to regard television as an intruder in the life we had known before, the life with longer and darker nights that allowed us to dream. In comparison, film had

long been an important artistic medium for both of us. Many cinematic works had provoked and profoundly affected us. People choose to go to see a film and choose what to see and with whom to see it. We want to make such works.

Therefore, Koma and I have been learning new technology, negotiating the process with our collaborators and creating works we feel comfortable with. Over the years, we have experimented with video and learned how to deal with it. We want to make work that we would want to see: a poetic merging of visual, sound, and kinetic composition that is neither dance documentation nor a television program. This is an inherently minor category, like poetry in the publishing industry, yet we all realize that poems are an essential part of our literary tradition. Minority forms have their place. Such independent media works may not be for broadcast, for home entertainment, or for booking and promotional use. Still, they can exist quietly, like books of poetry—if not for a mass market, at least for those who dare to open them.