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TDR: The Drama Review, Volume 63, Number 3, Fall 2019 (T243), pp. 148-154
(Article)

Published by Cambridge University Press



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Critical Acts

Inhuman Attunements

Eiko Otake's A Body in Places at The Met Cloisters

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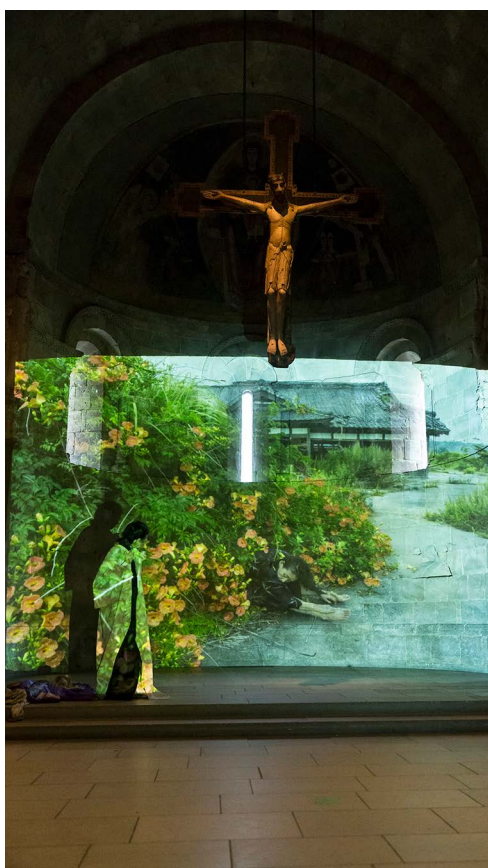


Figure 1. Eiko Otake, under the six-foot-tall white oak crucifix from Spain (ca. 1150–1200), appearing to be part of the projection of William Johnston's photograph of herself in Yaburemachi-Fukushima in Summer 2014. A Body in Places at The Met Cloisters, 5 November 2017. (Photo © Lev Radin)

I rush to the Fuentidueña Hall at The Met Cloisters on a cloudy yet luminous November morning. Upon entering the apse, this relic of sacred architecture from 12th-century Spain, everyday visibility disappears into a dark void. As my eyes adjust to the darkness, it takes another moment for me to adjust to the purpose of my visit. I have to slow down and position myself in the hall, among the pedestrian bodies of the audience, to discern a body that moves almost imperceptibly. Clad in a loose-fitting beige kimono, a faint figure leans against the limestone wall of the apse, almost camouflaged beneath the light beams of a video projector, which displays the image of a curved, tiled roof of an old, rundown house, half covered by what looks like an overgrown bush of Angel's Trumpets. Following the gaze of the pale figure, I recognize a similar body in the picture, wearing a black kimono and sitting hunched over beneath the voluminous orange flowers. With the power of its projected spectral twin, the physical body in the hall seems to take on more significance; it is both a force that alters the space and a force field that determines the energy of other bodies around it. As if held in place, no one leaves the room. Sitting or standing on three sides against the apse, no one fiddles with their belongings, no one attempts a quick move towards a more comfortable position. Instead, all of us silently apprehend this ghostly figure and her projected twin—for hours. Her motions are impossible to anticipate, antikinetic, yet so persistent that

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she seems to be dancing the slow drift of the earth's tectonic plates.

This richly layered performance is the latest installment of Eiko Otake's ongoing project *A Body in Places* (2014–), her first solo endeavor after a four-decade partnership as Eiko & Koma with Koma Otake, who suffered a foot injury in the early 2010s and performs less frequently. The project is her artistic response to the Fukushima “triple disaster”—a meltdown of Daiichi nuclear reactors caused by the tsunami that sprung from the 9.0 Richter scale Tohoku earthquake on 11 March 2011. Otake visited the region in the months following the event, which inspired the New York-based artist to pay four more visits to Fukushima between January 2014 and June 2017 with photographer William Johnston, a professor of Japanese history and Otake's colleague at Wesleyan University. Their collaboration resulted in a series of photographs exhibited as *A Body in Fukushima* (2014–), alongside Otake's performances of *A Body in Places* in public spaces such as train stations, markets, sanctuaries, libraries, and galleries in various cities in the United States and abroad. Besides New York, they have presented their work in Middletown, CT; Durham, NC; Hong Kong; Santiago and Valparaiso, Chile; and Tokyo, Japan.

The Met edition of *A Body in Places* continues Otake's engagement with the Fukushima disaster and the larger questions of nuclear power and environmental justice through the project's unique politics of production and display. Commissioned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art and Performa 17, Otake performed over three consecutive Sundays in November 2017 at each of the Met's branches—The Met Cloisters (5 November), The Met Breuer (12 November), The Met Fifth Avenue (19 November)—for the duration of the location's visiting hours. In the Met edition, Johnston's photographs are presented as a video installation as part of Otake's performance. As the entire project channels what might seem a distant time and place for its audiences worldwide, the dialectic between the Fukushima images and Otake's performative mourning shatters our willful amnesia, and pulls us into a profound meditation on the role

of humans in the destruction of the earth, not only in Fukushima but also beyond.

Using the entire hall and apse for her performance with a piece of red fabric, a purple futon, a pair of *geta* (wooden Japanese sandals), several kimonos of various colors, a chair, and a mobile cart upon which sits the enormous projector, Otake interweaves a choreography of improvised dance and stillness throughout the day. Intentional and attentive, each step builds from a small quiver in her toes, while her stride is vaguely irregular, evoking a tenuous balance on unsteady ground. She often raises her arms and contracts her chest to create some volume in front of her body, as if bearing an invisible mass. She hunches her shoulders and peels away one of the kimonos she wears in layers, like shedding skin with the passing of each hour. Descending to the floor, she lifts her legs and arms slightly, evoking an extremely decelerated convulsion before lying “deceptively still” by the apse, in the same manner described in one of the captions alongside an image of an irradiated forest (Otake 2017). Becoming tropes of a body ill at ease, these repeated gestures have an arresting effect on the audience.

Otake seems to slip through the cracks in an extended moment of rest as the meditative progression of the projected images on the wall takes over our attention. The seven-and-a-half-hour-long video is a sequence of Johnston's still images from various Fukushima towns along the Joban train line. The artists traveled by local roads, capturing the evacuated and still irradiated areas. Collectively, the images bring together moments of Otake dancing, or rather *communing*, with deserted train stations, half-destroyed houses, unsown fields, forests, shores, fishing ports, and forlorn shrines stretching in all directions from the coastal Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant—as a kind of choreographic rite. Edited by Otake from thousands of photographs, this unlooping video punctuates the unsettling absence of humans and animals, overtaken by a new landscape of vegetative life beyond the area's initial 12-mile exclusion zone. In this lacuna, Otake reclines askew over the ruins of concrete seawalls, dips her legs in the contaminated waters of the Pacific, or is caught mid-air while she runs barefoot on the empty streets, flying the red fabric in

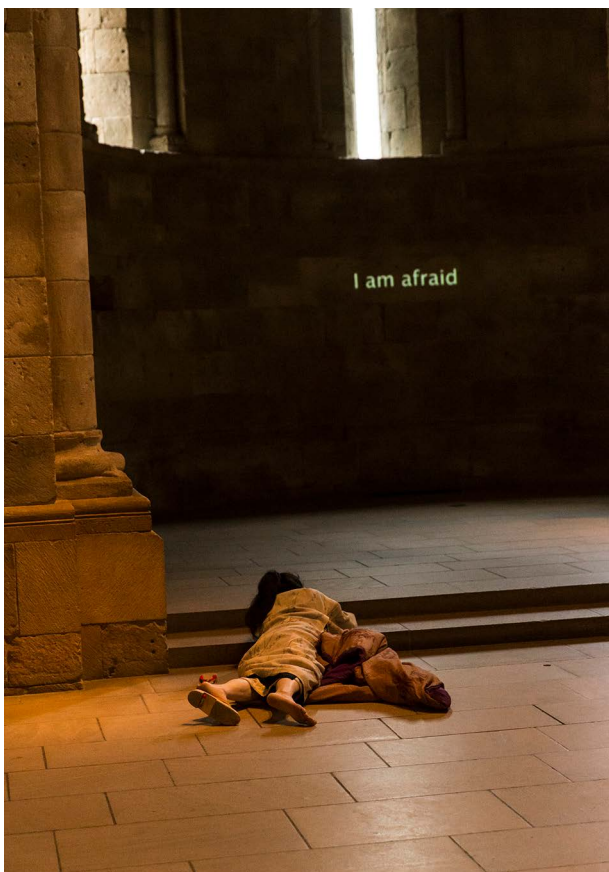


Figure 2. Eiko Otake on the steps by the Fuentidueña Apse, in *A Body in Places* at The Met Cloisters, 5 November 2017. (Photo © Lev Radin)

the irradiated wind. As the video unfolds and Otake moves the projection cart in the hall, the assemblage of photographs creates a cyclical pathway that brings into view the same towns across the four years photographed, some with almost no change, others unrecognizable after the decontamination efforts.

Otake's decision to transform the photo exhibition of *A Body in Fukushima* into a moving video installation that runs uninterrupted for the duration of the performance dramatically distinguishes the Met edition from the earlier iterations of *A Body in Places*.¹ In addition to moving the projection in space, Otake supports the flow of images with a

subtle soundscape she created out of found sounds and recordings, which interlaces a humming noise with the wind, the waves, drum beats, and a Japanese flute. By giving equal space, time, and motion to the Fukushima images within the performance, and subtly choreographing the way her audiences encounter them, Otake radically intervenes in the narratives by which the Fukushima catastrophe is now interpreted—or eradicated. The captions in between the images that navigate through the locations and years also subtly comment on the destructive dimensions of the state's energy policies and Tokyo Electric Power Company's mishandling of the reactors. These are interspersed with some facts that strike one more as an elegy than information: the height of the tsunami waves, the lethal levels of radiation, the number of evacuees, the date of the first train ride after the alleged decontamination. Against the Japanese government's haste to promote Fukushima's safety for agriculture and tourism (see Cabinet Office of Japan 2017a and 2017b) as well as the lack of

global discourse around the nuclear meltdown as an ongoing and shared problem, Otake's continuous research with *A Body in Places* attests to how an artist grapples with the impenetrable questions Fukushima poses: What remains after disaster? What moves? What is the vision of life without humans? And importantly for Otake, how can we communicate it?

Just as I start to settle into the absorbing flow of the images, Otake rematerializes with a thrust of her arm and a loud step forward into the middle of the hall, startling and unannounced like a falling tree trunk in a silent forest. These shifts of energy from stretches of micromovements to sudden and violent gestures not only impact how we view the video,

1. Although the video installation was a static projection at The Met Fifth Avenue performance, Otake's original intention was to have the same mobile installation there that she had at The Met Cloisters and The Met Breuer.



Figure 3. Eiko Otake, *blending in with William Johnston's photograph of herself at Komagamine Station, Fukushima, in Winter 2014, projected on the wall of the Fuentidueña Apse. A Body in Places at The Met Cloisters, 5 November 2017. (Photo © Lev Radin)*

they rupture our perception of time instilled by the slow movements of Otake and the progression of the video. Crouching down and crawling aggressively like an animal, or bending obliquely backwards in the fragile poise of a reed, Otake also breaks out of a familiar anatomy; when she regains a human form, walking in hovering steps or sitting, eyes closed, among the audience, the fleeting quality of her motions rather bears the impression of an ancestral spirit. Her mutating embodiment emulates the unpredictable rhythms of earthly life. Scholar Rosemary Candelario, writing on Eiko & Koma's oeuvre, refers to the "geological pace" (2016:4) of the duo's transformative movement language inspired by nature, a quality that Otake retains in her solo to reflect the vibrant world that gradually took over after Fukushima's evacuation. With her undulating presence, Otake trains us to follow her with other nonvisual



Figure 4. Eiko Otake, *sitting in front of the projection of William Johnston's photograph of herself in Fukushima. A Body in Places at The Met Cloisters, 5 November 2017. (Photo © William Johnston)*

senses, which tunes our bodies to the shaken but still living body of Fukushima.

The performative force of the images intensifies as Otake (or, at times, her dramaturg Mark McCloughan) moves the projector cart



Figure 5. Eiko Otake moving the projector cart through the gallery, during *A Body in Places* at The Met Breuer, 12 November 2017. (Photo © William Johnston)

in circles, animating these ghost towns, which were inhabited by fishing and farming communities for generations before the meltdown. While the projection magnetically lures our gaze to chase after it, as it warps over the antique walls and our fellow spectators, Otake's effortful way of pushing the cart around conveys the burden these images carry. The monumental installation at The Met Cloisters becomes a partner whose intervals of motion in the hall "stain the Met wall with Fukushima" (Wang 2017) and swallow the bodies inside. This choreographic approach to presenting the post-disaster images is paralleled by the movements of the camera between consecutive frames as Johnston and his camera draw close to Otake's agitated body against the large bags of contaminated soil or to an architectural detail in the façade of a secluded shrine, then pull back to take in the broader terrain itself, with Otake curled hidden on the ground or absent altogether. Johnston's tacit dance deepens the audience's spatial perception and invites them into the image, to share the overwhelming sense of placing one's body in this deeply traumatized yet persevering environment. Consequently, the video escapes the task of a documentary, to record and testify for a past performance without an audience, and instead cocreates a choreographic sphere in which the aftermath of the Fukushima meltdown leaks into the present.

From Minamisoma to Namie, from Tomioka to Iwaki, Otake in the photos underlines the distinct character of each Fukushima town by wearing a different kimono at each location they visit, inspired by the allusions of the colors and patterns on the fabric to the local myths or to hues in the scenery. During the live performances, Otake often picks up the same kimono off the floor and puts it on or plays with it as a fleshly extension to move in the manner of a creature, connecting the body we see in front of us with the body that moved in Fukushima. Likewise, Otake's body in the hall recreates a moment in the stills or reacts to her projected double with a gesture. A

sublime image of Otake spreading her arms in a dark kimono over the wide, sandy seashore of Ukedo Beach (3.7 miles north of the reactors), for example, gains an uncanny resonance when she opens her arms in the same garment right beneath the six-foot tall white oak crucifix hanging over the apse. At other moments, she seems to blend into the projection, adding a discrete shape to the image with her physical body or even seeming to hide inside it, like when she crawls against an image of the broken and radioactive household goods stacked inside a schoolyard.

But Otake does not mimic her projected movements or costumes entirely. In fact, her live performance marks the limits of representing the experience of disaster and its complex aftermath by reminding us of its mediation: Otake often gazes at the projection pensively, reaches her hands toward a detail to cover or underline it, or breaks into a dance that is completely different from the one in the frame in feeling or shape. Thus, she has us sit with the dissonance between the two bodies more than with their sameness, and the dissonance of Fukushima's inhuman landscape and disjointed temporality to the well-composed history the museum presents. Otake's acute attunement to the other bodies in the Fuentidueña Hall, as well as to the body of the hall, counteracts the institutional abstraction of space and time. The depictions of the Nativity in limestone sculp-

tures under the hall's high-vaulted darkness gain an eschatological meaning that transcends the display of an ancient artifact, as Otake adopts a more contained and reverential quality in front of the limited number of spectators.

While not confrontational, Otake approaches individuals and makes contact. I noted this at performances at the other two Met locations as well. As the gray box of The Met Breuer amplified the density and flow of the people on all sides of the gallery, Otake responded to their energy with sharper, more explosive movements, often dashing across the room and swinging the futon in the air to expand the contours of the space. At The Met Fifth Avenue, Otake sat beside a middle-aged woman in an orange sari who carried on her back a small machine that supported her breathing. It was hard to tell who held the other's hand first, but that mutual touch felt utterly integral to the piece.

At its core, *A Body in Places* bridges the gaps of time and location, while at the same time Otake's choreographic interruptions reveal the political stakes of such a transmission. The dramaturgical tension she establishes at the Met edition between live and mediated, presence and obscurity, immediacy and dissociation, translates into a corporeal experience for the audience between release and alertness. By constantly traversing these opposites Otake prompts us to question our implication in this presumably foreign disaster, especially when the poetic beauty of the photos denounces a recognizable portrayal of wreckage. This sobering incommensurability fleshes out what Anna Tsing calls the "patchy Anthropocene" in describing the ecological condition we live in today. With an anthropological approach, Tsing addresses the perplexity induced by the concept of the Anthropocene by arguing that



Figure 6. Eiko Otake, in front of the projection of William Johnston's photograph of herself in Yaburemachi-Fukushima in Summer 2014. *A Body in Places* at The Met Cloisters, 5 November 2017. (Photo © Lev Radin)

while it denotes the irrevocable environmental impact of human-generated events on a global scale, it announces itself unevenly in simplified landscapes where living things are removed from their life worlds and transformed into resources for industrial processes (2016:4). These alienated ecologies, among which Tsing includes Fukushima, produce and proliferate unfamiliar forms of decay and death instead of pure capitalist profit. However, in between and even within these territories, the enduring entanglements of humans and nonhumans



Figure 7. Eiko Otake sitting among audience members, during *A Body in Places* at The Met Breuer, 12 November 2017. (Photo © William Johnston)

attest to the “patches of liveability” (14), places that are still alive despite the threatening generality of the planetary destruction. Tsing locates our political task in paying attention to this very ambivalence as she underlines that “we experience liveability only through places” (3), reminding us to patiently stay with the Anthropocene’s conflicting scales of connection and disconnection (5), while we do “our best to keep [these patches] in place” (14).

Simultaneously mourning the dead and greeting the emergent feral life, Otake anticipates Tsing’s insights as she insists on going back to Fukushima repeatedly in order to unravel this confounding amalgamation of natural and human-made disaster. As we travel from place to place within the slow ecology of *A Body in Places*, from residential areas that mutant plants have reclaimed to clearings with heaps of irradiated debris, Otake’s body, both in the projected frame and in the hall, returns us to our own bodies by making us feel her radiation fatigue over time. Given the tactical control of Prime Minister Shinzō Abe’s government over information on the radiation standards and health statistics in order to rebrand and repopulate the region for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics (see Watanabe et al. 2018), Otake seems to suggest that her responsibility as an artist-citizen lies more in registering Fukushima viscerally by doing the legwork rather than correcting the government’s misinformation.

It is impossible to detect the passage of time until we see the images of the first living beings in Fukushima other than Otake. No, that’s not true: we have seen a few workers in radiation suits and one lone seagull soaring in the distance, but do they count as inhabitants? “For the first time I dance on streets where people are living,” the caption reads, “I see only elder people” (Otake 2017). The sound of a bike wheel stirs the numbed senses after hours of the deep droning of the sound score. A dance of hesitation follows while Otake collects all her kimonos to leave but then retraces her steps back into the hall, coinciding with a promise on the caption: “I will return to Fukushima.” Like Otake, the audience does not know how to exit.

Feeling exhausted after my seventh hour in the Cloisters but unwilling to go out to the city’s flow, I think to myself: I will remember the three middle-aged Japanese women who stayed the whole time at the Cloisters, calmly keeping watch over Otake’s body, like the three kings in the depiction of the Adoration of the Magi I saw on its walls. I will remember the shiny red gate by the ocean in the photos. I will remember the loneliness of undecontaminable shrines. I will remember.

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https://doi.org/10.1162/dram_a_00861
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