

# DISTANCE IS MALLEABLE



EIKO OTAKE'S  
DUET PROJECTS

**EIKO OTAKE**  
with **JOHN KILLACKY**

**JOHN KILLACKY** I've known your work for forty-two years as an audience member, presenter, commissioner, collaborator, and friend. With your husband, Koma, you created a movement and performing style that was sculptural, primal, and existential. In 2014, you began performing *A Body in Places*, a series of site-specific solo projects. Three years later, you started *The Duet Project* – often working with artists of different disciplines, ages, races, and cultures – forging new aesthetic ground resulting in interdisciplinary projects. These works are imbued with ferocious kineticism, simultaneously audacious, feral, and fragile.

**EIKO OTAKE** You are one of my *Duet Project* partners and I have long admired the media works you've created. In July 2018 at Jacob's Pillow, we were sitting near 'Sam's tree'; there was a planting ceremony a day before to honour Sam Miller, our mutual friend, who had helped me conceive *The Duet Project*. It occurred to me then to invite you into the project. As with my other collaborators, I had no idea what we might do, but you said 'YES!' We ended up sharing our eulogies, in which we spoke to our mothers. We recorded and edited them together at Vermont PBS studio with Brian Stevenson as another collaborator.

Was our talking to camera a dance? Was my talking after you a duet? YES, in ways that extend what people might think of a dance or a duet. Our work was a layered duet; not only between us, but each of us with our dead mothers and with Brian as cameraman. Speaking in English in my artwork was new to me at the time. I could not have done that without your encouragement.

with **KOMA OTAKE**

**JK** You continually amaze me as you immerse yourself in myriad collaborations that are quite different from the body of work you and Koma made for decades.

**EO** I worked with Koma from 1972 to 2014 and I feel proud of the work we created together. Eiko & Koma collaborated with others, mainly music artists, but we worked within defined roles. When our *Retrospective Project* (2009–2012) ended, I was sixty years old. At that age, ten- and twelve-year Chinese/Japanese cycles both align for the first time with that of one's birth year: it is a full cycle and also a new beginning. I wanted to test myself to see if I could stand on my own feet and look at the world directly without the 'house' of Eiko & Koma. To do so, I decided to liberate myself from theatres and expose my body to a wide range of audiences. I enjoyed arriving at a community with only the luggage I could carry and taking time to study a performance site. People talk to me more when I work alone.

After performing solo in more than seventy places, I invited artists, mostly already friends, to converse and experiment with me. Doing so, I hoped, would help me answer my lingering question, 'Why am I still in America after so many years?' I didn't come here to assimilate. I left Japan to encounter others. I have to continue that path. Talking thoroughly with other artists was not easy. I had to work hard to articulate myself and to listen to others without the pressure to agree. I learnt that I think better with such effortful conversations.

I do not work well alone in a dance studio. I crave the heat from other eyes and minds. Performing solo in public has given me that, but working with another artist has also offered the tension I need to be performative. That is why I do not have to put every duet experience on a stage to be seen by audiences. Experimentation is not a rehearsal towards a public performance. Working with others, one at a time, pushing beyond each of our norms, is densely performative. Two artists getting to know each other on a deeper level feels radical but doable. Once that happens, we cannot go back to our prior selves.

**with WILLIAM JOHNSTON**

**JK** With photographer William Johnston, you travelled five times between 2014–2019 to the irradiated lands surrounding the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Plant. His opulent photos captured you embodied in the desolate detritus and had many manifestations resulting in exhibitions, books, and media components.

**EO** It was December 2013 when I asked Bill if he would come to Fukushima to photograph me. Bill immediately agreed, which I had expected. By teaching a course on the atomic bomb together, I knew his academic and personal interests. I knew his photography and humanity. What I did not know then is that our collaboration would change both of our lives.

I had previously visited the area without him in 2011, five months after the meltdowns and hydrogen explosions of the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Plant. In observing the Philadelphia train station where I was to perform a durational solo, I felt I had to go back to abandoned stations in Fukushima: I wanted to use my body as a conduit between very different stations 6,700 miles (11,000 km) apart.

Our photographs could not have been produced without each other. I never told him when and how to shoot. Instead, I thought about the dead people swept away by tsunamis. I mourned the land covered by radiation. I danced with regret, sorrow, and anger. When Bill takes photographs, he moves physically, runs to different viewpoints, walks backward, and squats. I had asked him to photograph my solo, but we danced a series of duets in Fukushima!

Photographs capture moments, not duration. Bill's photos allowed me to reflect on how my body is seen in landscapes and how some moments are dense with possibilities. Our duet does not end with Bill's click. He is merciless in selecting photos. As a performer, I felt sympathetic to some unselected photos and the moments captured in them. I did not go to Fukushima to create beautiful photographs. I went there to see, feel, and remember what

happened in Fukushima. I learnt to edit videos so I could 'rescue' some of the unselected photos and moments I might otherwise forget.

Inserting words and sound, I created a feature-length film, *A Body in Fukushima*, which has been screened in film festivals in many countries. In museums and theatres, I performed with both projected videos and large prints. Bill photographed these performances. Our recent exhibitions included layers of my body working with layers of Fukushima landscapes. Dimensions of our work have grown without a master plan.

Bill said, 'One photograph can be a performance when a person really looks into it.' That notion encouraged me to create media works which do not betray my identity as a performer.

**with DAVID HARRINGTON**

**JK** For the video component of the Fukushima project, David Harrington of Kronos Quartet improvised in response to your film. You have a long relationship with David and Kronos. Earlier this year, you created a score and performed with them at Carnegie Hall, and in July he performed live as part of your video installation at Colorado Springs Fine Art Center.

**EO** Yes, David has been incredibly generous. Eiko & Koma had two evening-length collaborations with Kronos, which made us friends. David said he was challenged by my remark, 'I do not really need music for my work.' So right before the Covid lockdown, David visited me at my home and improvised for two days while watching my Fukushima film. I recorded him with my phone, which allowed me to move intimately with the details of his body and that of his violin. Then I was ready to dance with him in our first improvised duet.

David's granddaughter filmed him playing in the Redwood Forest in California, where he put the strings of his over two-hundred-year-old violin onto moss to create music, imagining Fukushima an ocean away. Over the years,



99: Elko with *A Body in Fukushima* at the Metropolitan Museum New York, 12 Nov 2018. Photo by William Johnston.

David allowed me to manipulate and even to ‘hide’ his sound into soundscapes I mixed. He knows I did not want my work to be helped too much by music. However, his sounds brought my film to a subtly elevated realm, and his compassion lifted and redirected my spirit when I felt desperate about nuclear matters.

When he invited me to dance at Kronos’ Carnegie Hall concert in January, I proposed instead that the five of us move, scream, and make sounds. The piece was a series of four duets between me and each member of the quartet. Next, David arrived alone in Colorado where he performed with me both at a cemetery and in the museum. These were his first public performances without Kronos.

David said he could not play his violin while walking, but he did. He did so with bare

feet, even lying down. We improvised, trusting ourselves and each other. Friendship, collaboration, and duet are instigators that challenge us and move us to the unknown.

David wore the late Sam Miller’s raincoat in the museum gallery in Colorado. He chose to end the performance by playing toward the video of my speaking to my dead mother from *Elegies*. David then sat up, stopped playing, and watched the video. That made everyone there listen to my voice. I saw my mother in my face and heard her in my voice.

**with JOAN JONAS**

**JK** Your collaboration with video and performance pioneer Joan Jonas presented in Danspace Project and Castelli Gallery in New



York highlighted work and conversations you two had over several years.

**EO** Joan is my senior of sixteen years, though she does not behave like one. How persevering and articulate she is! Joan is instinctive and playful, yet she seriously studied art history. I did not.

Joan came to my home for our first dinner in December 2018, a day after she travelled back from Japan. She then invited me to perform privately and recorded it on video. In 2019, we worked intensely for several days in her summer home in Nova Scotia. At our 'goodbye,' she said, 'Now we are friends.' In 2021, she took the lead in creating a video work together. This spring, we collaborated more fully. We danced, sang, and banged

on the walls of Castelli Gallery. In all, she was fierce. I realised how in Japan I had been conditioned about age-appropriateness. Joan's vigour gives me a different perspective on ageing.

We are both busy, but we have made our duets happen, not only by performing, but by strolling, watching films, and putting our videos side by side. Joan is a faithful friend and an agitator. She said we could perform together again in two years. I cannot wait.

**with CHIKUA OTAKE**

**JK** You often honour your dead: at Fukushima, commemorating 9/11, and in cemeteries. This month, you will be performing in the galleries of the Asia Society in New York with

100: Eiko with a print of Chikua Otake's painting, video still.



101: Eiko with John Killacky. Photo by Jeanmarie Cross.

a painting by your grandfather Chikuha Otake (1878–1936), an eccentric Japanese artist. And you consider these duets.

**EO** We only get to know death by attending to the dying or to the dead. Dancing with the dead not only makes me know death but also life.

My grandfather died sixteen years before I was born, so I had no attachments. But by performing with his paintings in museum galleries, I began to care about this scandalous artist. Encountering him this way, my stomach churned, and I had a slight headache. I made a series of movement decisions, responding to what I sensed was his core. I felt in myself his excessiveness and his performative hospitality.

By looking at works by artists who passed away, savouring their lines, hearing episodes of their lives, and touching what they left, I feel more acutely that they are now dead but they were once alive.

Each duet brings me to a singular place, both strangely familiar but scarily new. I dance in that place with each duet partner, grateful for their willingness. I allow myself to imagine the same willingness from the dead. Though dead people do not get to know me, they probably wished that their work and stories would provide such encounters. When our sense of distance lessens or collapses, we can no longer be indifferent to the other. That feels rich.

I like this as a way of life.

