

Site Works Feeling Wind, Feeling Gaze

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When Koma and I perform our site piece *River*, we enter into the river as guests and are grateful for the beauty and pleasure we are allowed to share. But we aren't the only guests. Bats, insects, wind, twilight, moon, mist, children, geese, and fishermen also visit the river, and they do not seem to mind us being with them for a night. It feels wonderful to be included. We breathe in the dream of the river and encourage the audience to join in our dream. If some prefer, they can join the dreams of the geese or of the moon instead. Rowboats drifting by and voices whispering in wonderment do not interrupt these dreams.

Wanting to do something different:

When Koma and I first started to work together, we did not perform in theaters. In the 1970s, we performed on rooftops, campus greens, and plazas. We did not have any money so we performed where it was free and where there were people. Then, because presenters invited us, we moved into theaters.

It was not until after we made many theater works that we renewed our interest in site works. So far we have produced five site works, *River* (1995), *Breath* (1998), *Caravan Project* (1999), *Offering* (2002), and *Tree Song* (2004). All of our site pieces, except *Breath*, which was specifically designed for the Whitney Museum, are outdoor works that toured widely. By the mid 90s, we had developed close working relationships with a group of presenters and, as a result, within several years we re-visited many of the same cities and same theaters. Other communities we were told, did not have the "right" space or an "audience ready for our style of dance." But

we did not want to limit ourselves to being in the “right” place or with a “ready” audience. We wanted to do something different or at least differently.

From their own perspective, the presenters we worked with understood this. They cared not only about their subscribers, but also about people in their communities. So they would send us out to do outreach activities. Often these outreach projects act as publicity for our performances in their theaters or to create another layer of “encountering” between artists and audience members. But we also visit with people who we know are not likely to come to our shows. They may be ill, old, young, poor, disinterested, busy, or in prison. We, and our presenters, want to offer an artistic experience to these people as well. We know from our own lives that experiencing art is the best art education. From our visits to senior citizen homes and elementary schools, we slowly learned that not only could we perform in places that were not theaters, but that we could also give these new or “accidental” audiences something profound. So rather than shying away from these activities, we began taking them on. Being without theatrical gadgets, those outreach activities often made us feel *naked*, poor, bottom line. We like these feelings because they reinforce the sense that being professional comes from motivation and commitment rather than any prepared *looks*.

From our experiences in theaters and in other places, we started to wonder how we could offer fully realized performances in neighborhoods and communities without a proper theater space. By bringing the work to places where people were not expecting to encounter it, Koma and I wished to radically enlarge the definition of the art audience. By performing outdoors and in public places, we thought we could also give our long-time viewers an opportunity to watch our dance from a very different perspective. Thus in 1995 we spent a whole summer in a mountain stream in the Catskill Mountains creating and rehearsing *River*. Villagers watched us

float downstream many times that summer. Once we created a design of the piece from a very particular site of a particular river, we then brought that design to different rivers, lakes, and ponds. This training made us be able to see potential beauty of nature where it is not expected, such as indoor site.

Breath (1998)

Commissioned by the Whitney Museum of American Art, *Breath* was a month-long living installation. Though it was not an outdoor work, *Breath* was a site-specific installation created for a specific gallery (a video gallery), in a specific location in the museum, for a specific time (the installation was up for four weeks).

First we thought we were commissioned to make an installation without us. But the curator Matthew Yokobovsky thought otherwise. He reminded us that we have always inhabited our sets. So we began discussing the idea of our physical appearance: how, when, and how long. If we appeared at certain times in the installation (that was on view all hours the museum was open), were we like animals in a zoo appearing at scheduled feeding/show times? How do we present ourselves to viewers who come in and out throughout a day? Our answer was scary. We decided our bodies would be a part of the installation; we would perform all the hours the museum was open for four weeks!

For *Breath*, we created a cave-like landscape with hand-sewn raw silk that was filled with dead leaves. Three video projectors simultaneously projected close-ups of our bodies onto the black painted wall. We hid many small fans so there was movement of the leaves. This “wind” blew small particles in front of the lighting instruments so light shimmered as if in a wood. We

built the structure to merge ceiling and walls and put the projectors at their lowest intensity so that in and around the projected area there were no straight lines.

Movement was not the main factor of the work. The experience was about savoring relationships between different beings: the occupants and the landscape; gaze and subject; those who pass and those who inhabit the space; the most-contemporary of buildings and the most ancient, outdoor images.

Performing for an audience, whose comings and goings we could not control, was a challenge. The very idea of performance work was put into question. We found the experience both liberating and satisfying. In this museum, we felt we were becoming a part of a cultural landscape, literally and metaphorically. During the four weeks, one of us was always in the installation. We took turns doing "solos" and taking breaks. "Duet" sections happened when one joined and before the other left. The four weeks gave us a lot of time to step out of the "stage" and observe both the work itself and the viewers' reaction to it. It was wonderful to notice a few familiar faces who came more than once. A few people sat for hours in the room. A woman brought us a poem. Another brought cookies. Some mornings there were only a few viewers in the room. On the weekends the room was so crowded people could not get in. The most delicious time was after the museum closed, when we walked through galleries to the staff exit. We stopped to see art works by Georgia O'Keefe and Andrew Wyeth; we were alone with artists and paintings we admire. They were our neighbors! Sculptures and installations, bodies and gaze....

Our bodies being vulnerable and our work being a verb.

Being outdoors or in public spaces, we have fewer tools to make us look special. We cannot, as in theaters, disappear into dressing rooms before or after the performance. We prepare

our shows in public, often answering the questions of curious passersby, or we stay to hear an audience's response. Being around and exposed to our audience members makes us less protected, more accessible for dialogue, as well as more susceptible to critical assaults and physical disturbances. In the past we created theater works that we performed naked. Those pieces emphasized our vulnerability. When we perform in public spaces, however, not only do we find ourselves already vulnerable, but a law also prohibits us from being literally naked. Thus we had to accept and deepen our metaphorical nakedness. By *nakedness* I mean being evocative, existential, challenging, and affirmative nakedness, the opposite of commercialized nudity. On stage Koma and I have never wanted to present bodies that are super-trained or super-healthy. We always wanted our bodies and dances to be something people wanted to touch, sympathize with, feel connection to, and get emotional about.

Working outside of theaters and in many sites that are less than favorable, we can continue to present our bodies as vulnerable and as a part of a landscape. This means our intentions, objectives, processes, and our audiences' perceptions of art and environment are more intricately connected and affect each other in surprising ways. The merging of ends and means, as well as a merging of "us and them" is unsettling and curious. We are not presenting a dance work; we are dancing and breathing, using "dance" as a verb rather than presenting it as a noun. In site work, everything is a work-in-progress.

Caravan Project (premiered in 1999)

We were sad when the Whitney Museum installation ended. We had become used to and appreciated being a part of a landscape in public view. So Koma and I created the *Caravan Project*, a portable and totally self-contained theater piece that can also be viewed as a living

installation “for delivery.” Like a library truck that delivers books to rural areas, or like an old Japanese bicycle man who delivers illustrated stories, we deliver our art. Everything necessary for the performance – the visual installation and the means of lighting it – was installed in a customized 8' x 14' black trailer. Doors on all four sides open up so viewers can see us from all angles as they move around. Exaggerated and condensed version of our *Breath* in the Whitney, the interior of the Caravan Project constitutes a sharply sloped hill at the bottom and internal-organ-like hanging from the top sandwiched a crevice of diagonal space, in and from which we bob and sink. The structure was created by tree branches to which thousands (literary) pieces of shredded cheese cloth, painted- in different shades, were hand-glued. The landscape was so unlike a theater stage as it is small, unsymmetrical and private. At night, lit from inside, the detailed interior shines like a magic jewelry or music box. At a quick glance we may look like still figures in the box. One grandmother who saw the entire show still could not believe we were live people! But as they looked closer and spent more time looking, people knew we were conducting our own experiments in our own dance laboratory,

As a site work, *the Caravan Project* is a self-contained, prepared piece, but it recognizes, affects, and is affected by the specifics of different sites, landscapes, sounds, and communities. We perform the same basic design, varying the running time from one to three hours. In its shorter manifestation the dance is theatrical, acknowledging a beginning, middle, and end. But in the longer version our bodies are part of a larger landscape, welcoming any passersby.

On the day of a performance, we drive up, unhitch the trailer from our Jeep, connect to electricity supplied by the host presenter, adjust the lights and the set, and we are ready. We then perform under the night sky for a hundred or so people who might have assembled for the event or who just happen by. The site can be any place the Jeep can go – a public park, a river bank, a

street, a mall parking lot, a beach, a college green, the garden at a senior center, or even someone's backyard.

The piece begins when an assistant opens a door on the longer side of the trailer, revealing the interior. During the piece, the doors are opened one by one until the audience can see us from all four directions. Then at the end of the piece the doors are closed one by one, making the views more limited. When the last door on the narrow side of the trailer is shut, the work is finished, confining us inside.

People can contemplate the installation from whatever perspective they choose. Because of this we can no longer compose our dance for a particular "front" or hide anything in the "back." Given the intimacy of an audience only several feet away, this confusion of direction is compelling for performers and viewers alike. Viewers see another group of viewers in the background who are looking at us from the opposite direction. In this way, audience members gain other possible viewing experiences that deprive them of the sense of an absolute place. No one sees everything, but everyone can choose their own perspective and what they want to see. Beyond the circle of audience we all see trees or sky. Wind moves particles of our installation, making our shining jewelry box a part of its outdoor environment.

At the end, viewers inevitably gather in one direction knowing the last door will soon shut. They crowd together tightly, looking into the narrow opening, as our assistant slowly closes the final door. It is as if people are congregating for a final farewell as a hearse door is shut, sending a coffin away. Sympathetic passersby join the mourners. Following the noise of the last door locking, I hear the audience sigh. We stay motionless while our audience starts to wander into the night.

Free Under the Stars

When we perform in prestigious theaters and festivals, Koma and I are well aware that a limited class of people can come to see our work because of the increasing expense of theater tickets. Due to the focus on advertising and spectacle in our society, these people come to a theater expecting their money's worth. This creates a false link between the price of art and the value of art; if a performance does not live up to an audience's expectation of "worth," the audience may be disappointed in the theatrical experience. But Koma and I feel that art is a *gift*, not quantifiable. We want to present our dance something primal, closer to a prayer or a ritual. Therefore, Koma and I, when possible, want to perform free for the unknowable and unknowing public.

When we produce free events I enjoy the possibility of curiosities and surprises. Free audiences are willing to be puzzled or opinionated, to recommend the event to their friends, or even to help out. Some reactions we have received include: "What is this?" "What are they doing?" "Strange!" "Why are they here and for what?" "Free? Why? Great! Then I will come!" "Can I bring children?" "Can we help you clean the river?" "Shall I bring warm soup for you?" "I have never seen this river at night. It looks so ancient. Beautiful!" "Did you know a boat stayed off shore and watched your dance from the opposite direction than us, the audience?" The wide variety of reactions make me feel that Koma and I are offering unpredictable adventures to people and by doing so, are creating a small time and space in which we all are a little more spontaneous.

In this regard, it is always particularly striking for me to see the crowd who ventures to come despite the bad weather that inevitably accompanies some of our free outdoor concerts. People who come for a free concert in difficult conditions have a very different feeling than the

easygoing atmosphere of free comfortable summer events. During our performance in the Delaware River in 1995, the sky broke and treacherous showers started. In a few minutes, we lost half the audience. But people told me that a strong bond was created among the people who stayed and that this bond is often remembered in their family gatherings. For our 1999 *Caravan Project* in Bryant Park, we were encouraged to see more than one hundred people show up in heavy rain. Because we perform this piece in a trailer, the performance was announced as proceeding, rain or shine. We were protected by the trailer, but audiences were exposed and wet. I remember reaching out to the rain so I could also get wet. The audience knew my feeling. Our wet eyes met.

Offering (premiered in 2002)

The original idea for *Offering* was to bring what was inside of the trailer of *Caravan Project* to the open air. The trailer in *Caravan Project* was, among many things, a hearse and a womb. Continuing this focus on death, we initially wanted to name the work *Coffin Dance*. However, after 9/11 we felt we had to rename the work, *Offering*. Those of us who live in New York saw casket after casket in the weeks and months following 9/11. Death was no longer in a closet. We all grieved, but also saw the danger of anger. Koma and I wanted to design *Offering* as a ritual that allowed people simultaneously to mourn, remember, share, and face death. Koma and I had a studio in the World Trade Center throughout the year 2000 as a part of Lower Manhattan Cultural Council space grant program. We remembered details of the buildings and remembered many of the people who worked there. The attack was brutal and merciless but we did not wish revenge. Instead, we wanted to mourn.

For this ritual of mourning, we created a 4' x 8' x 4' structure that turns and that was covered by a mound of dirt. Most of the dance was done on this structure surrounded by the audience who sat in a circle. With our every movement, dirt fell from the structure onto black foil below. Underneath the set we placed a microphone that slightly amplified the sound of the dirt falling. The dirt symbolized a grave when Koma buried me in it, but it also represented a field when I tried to grow or bloom from it. The structure looked at once like a cradle, altar, planting box, and open casket.

In the summer of 2002, Koma and I performed *Offering* in six parks in Manhattan. In planning the piece, we visited the parks and recognized that these were the places, after September 11th, where people gathered together to cry or to get information. We met many wonderful people who worked or volunteered to keep their parks clean and beautiful. It was surprising to acknowledge this beauty in wounded Manhattan. Recognizing different neighborhoods and their parks, we wished each performance site – World Financial Center Plaza, Dag Hammarskjold Plaza, Tudor City Green Park, Clinton Community Garden, Bryant Park, and Madison Square Park – could shine as different jewels tied together by our performances.

That summer, each performance of *Offering* was co-produced by a different park committee or a neighborhood organization. These local people and caretakers were our audience. As I was taking off my costume in a janitors' locker room in Madison Park, a woman wearing a park uniform who we had seen earlier that day, hugged me and said "thank you for coming." Many park people and neighbors repeated this greeting, reversing the usual performer/audience relationship. In theaters, even in a new town, we welcome our audience, because we regard theaters as our *home*, our element. But performing in the parks, we became the visitors and the

people who live in the neighborhood and play or work in the parks were the ones who welcomed us.

The same lady from the park, who I imagine may not have come to see our show in a theater, gave me her earnest interpretation of the work. She did not need a program note. She did not know us, our origins, or the title of the piece, but her life knowledge responded to our work. She looked happy. When people like art they congratulate themselves in responding to something they think is good, beautiful, and moving. As this lady taught me again, if there is no intimidation, everyone can be an expert in her understanding.

In 2003 we remade *Offering* for Danspace Project and performed it five times in the graveyard of St Mark's Church. Koma buried me almost completely with dirt, quietly lay down by me, and thrashed Japanese ceremonial arrows over and over into the mound of dirt. A war was waging. Dirt became much more than a set. Dirt represented the significance and reality of the earth, the condition and destination of our violated living and dying. The Second Avenue traffic in downtown Manhattan was a significant part of this burial's background music.

On tour and abroad, we had to let go of our *Offering* set that was too big to carry by air, but we always created a huge mound of dirt as an earthy landscape and a grave. This least exotic, easily attainable, and inexpensive material turned out to speak volumes to many viewers, evoking their memories. Dancing with dirt made us physically dirty and that enhanced our vulnerability. One Polish woman told me how the dirt in our work reminded her that it "absorbs tears, sweat, and blood." It is this "sensual" reaction we seek in our outdoor, site performances.

On September 11, 2003 Koma and I performed *Offering* in Seattle, commemorating the second anniversary of 9/11. Many people surprised me by coming to our performance at a remote beach. It happened to be a very cold and misty day, but more than three hundred people

dared a long cold walk along the ocean to the performance site. People were bundled up with rain gear and heavy blankets. For 60 minutes they stayed in the coldest wind, giving us their strongest attention. I was deeply moved by their commitment. It was as if they “invested” in our performance, not with money, but with their willingness to attend.

To be continued

We continue to create and perform site works. Our site works connect us with many people in many countries who may never enter a theater. We go to perform in places such as a Cambodian village or monastery on the Hungarian mountaintop. We continue to love the juxtaposition of our own vision and other factors of life and landscape, for which we can take neither blame, nor credit. We hope our audiences will someday tell their grandchildren what they remember about seeing two strange Japanese people dance in the summer air of their towns. Then our dance will become a part of old stories that live in the landscape and the backdrop of people’s lives.