

MOVEMENT AS INSTALLATION

Eiko & Koma in Conversation with Matthew Yokobosky

*[From May 28 to June 21, 1998, the Whitney Museum of American Art presented a "live installation" by Eiko & Koma titled *Breath*. Within the 35' x 30' x 16' dimensions of the Whitney Museum's Film and Video Gallery, Eiko & Koma created an environment composed of a raked platform strewn with tea-stained silk and leaves, in which video projections, programmed lighting, and occasional sound effects filled the space. Within this environment, Eiko & Koma performed for seven hours a day—during regular Museum hours—for the duration of the month-long exhibition. In conjunction with this exhibition, a public dialogue was held between Eiko & Koma and Matthew Yokobosky, who was the Curator of Film and Video at Whitney Museum of American Art through Spring, 1999, and is currently Exhibition Designer, Brooklyn Museum of Art. This talk was transcribed by Leslie Ava Shaw, then edited by Matthew Yokobosky and Eiko & Koma.]*

YOKOBOSKY: You first began working in the medium of movement in the early 1970s in Japan. How did you both come to this medium?

EIKO: The only thing I remember is at some point Koma and I were tired of political discussions and fighting. What remained for us was the human body and movement—which was something that was "being" to us—in the confusing late 60s and early 70s. Some of you may recall that time; it wasn't much different here than it was in Japan.

YOKOBOSKY: Koma, were you coming to movement for the same reasons?

KOMA: I believe so. I'm not Eiko, so I can't speak directly about that. And I still have some trouble understanding where our interests overlap—whether our motivations are the same or just related. Basically, I felt that I'm a physically oriented person. And I had some trouble being with friends or other people. I thought this kind of trial [collaborating with Eiko] . . . might help me psychologically . . . interacting with another person. But, I'm still trying to discover and understand.

YOKOBOSKY: So movement and art have been a way for you to engage in a dialogue with other people . . . which is the reason many artists begin to make work, especially in public spaces. In an early work *Fur Seals*, you and Eiko were performing on a beach.

EIKO: Yes, it was 1977, 1978. Very early. It was in Point Reyes, California. We studied the seals, and we spent a lot of time by the beach looking at the seals, dancing and then noticing that they were looking at us after a certain time. We actually jumped into the ocean with them.

YOKOBOSKY: A lot of your early movement is based on human movement and on animal movements. It goes against how choreography is usually created—often putting together a sequence of movements and repeating those movements, and so that if you were to return to that ballet, for example, the movements could be repeated or replicated. In your work, it's more intuitive and you take gliding movement or a subtle shift. These movements have developed through a response to observation, through seeing other animals, other beings in nature moving. How do you bring all of that together within the context of dance?

EIKO: In our early years, Koma and I really didn't have much contact with the dance field. We did not invest much of our time in dance studios. When we came to America in 1976, I really took no more than ten classes in dance. We never worked under any other choreographer other than each other. We never paid to learn other people's vocabulary. It was never an interest for us to learn a vocabulary that could make us into modern dancers. But we were often interested in the same subject matter as other dance professionals and with that interest a sense of experimentation and of adventure . . . which is involved with movement. So it's not that we are only interested in animals or plants, but we're interested in life as life, and sometimes it is not necessarily only about the human.

Sometimes, though—but not always—we feel a little disturbed about what humans have been doing, and it is also a relief for us not to be confined with humanity. It is not to say that I deny humanity, but to strengthen our sense of being, we needed to look broader in regards to who and what we are. And I believe that that was what our audience wanted to see from us. It's not so much that they come to see Eiko & Koma. It is much more of a sense of how the movement can be more physically felt without making a story of human beings of the time.

YOKOBOSKY: Through movement, then, you are looking to have a more universal exchange with your audience—as opposed to having to appreciate the technique of a specific rote style of dance.

EIKO: Yes, it's a more instinctive approach to how and why we want to dance. We like to dance about something that is compelling to us, and so, often, that is the tree, it is the mountains, and it is seals.

YOKOBOSKY: Or the invisible forces of our environment, such as growth or wind or the movement of a river. *River* was a very interesting work, because you did it in two different versions. You did it as an outdoor version in the Delaware River and then you did it as an indoor version at BAM [Brooklyn Academy of Music] recently. What was it like to translate this work from one environment to the other?

KOMA: Well, to begin the long evolution of *River*—the reason we went to the [outdoor] river is that over our twenty-plus year collaboration our performances were mainly in the theatre, a proscenium stage. And I love being in the theatre, but sometimes it is tiresome and perhaps it's not healthy—even if we make a dance about trees or mountains—we have no chance to see trees, no chance to feel wind. And that's the reason we moved outdoors. We had to put ourselves physically in the water. That's what we tried three summers ago. We went to Delaware. . . .

EIKO: We, ultimately, went to more than a dozen rivers to perform the work.

KOMA: And each river was a different experience. We even went to Japan to perform this piece. In the summertime, the usual way in which the piece was structured, we would start the performance right after sunset . . . and slowly bring up theatre lights as necessary.

EIKO: After it gets dark.

KOMA: So first the performance starts with natural light, and slowly we bring up about twenty lights as the sun goes down. When we have finished the performance, it's pitch black, and the lights make the invisible “night” nature visible. The performance totals about 70 minutes.

EIKO: The natural qualities of the river are also a part of the performance. To begin, we usually drift downstream to the audience by the side of the river and then end the evening by drifting downstream to exit. When we exit the audience is left with the river being subtly strewn with a minimum of theatre lighting. And since it is the end of the day, the mist comes out as the temperature changes. Our primary concern, though, is how to be part of something larger than who we are. In that sense, we are visitors to the river. During our visit, we share the time with the river and then we disappear and the river is left alone. People who live in the community have a sense of seeing the river in a very new, different way. In every outdoor river performance, we not only worked with art producers but also with environmental and activist groups, so that people have a sense of the information about the river. Are they safe? Is Eiko O.K. in the river? There's a lot of concerns that arise and we hope that are being answered. This will hopefully stay with the audience. We hope that we are giving some kind of awareness to the environment as much as to the community.

Also, this exploration of the American landscape was also our way of learning about this country. We are still immigrating to this country, 21 years later. Today, we may be thought of as American because we are in the Whitney Museum of American Art, but in many ways, we are also still Japanese. While it's very easy for us to know Manhattan or San Francisco or Seattle, getting to know this whole continent as a landscape is a long process and takes many years, decades, a lifetime to know. So being in the river was our way of getting to know this land a little more—though we never answered your question of transforming it to the indoors.

As Koma said, it was very difficult for us to return to the theatre. We dreaded it after being in nature. It wasn't inviting at all. And that's where we had to rely on our craft



Eiko and Koma in *Fur Seals*, originally given in Point Reyes, California, in the late 1970s.
Photo: Courtesy Eiko and Koma.

Eiko and Koma in *River* (outdoor version). Photo: Courtesy Harper Blanchit.



and collaborators. We needed help to return to the theatre, and we actually got that help from the Kronos Quartet—who became not only our musicians and colleagues, but contributed something in many more ways.

KOMA: . . . the spirit of the river.

EIKO: They really shared our whole journey of presenting the river indoors. We even went to South America to tour with them. So that was our journey from outdoor to indoor. In the theatre, music evoked a sense of the actual river that carries us through the work.

YOKOBOSKY: It's very interesting that you speak so evocatively about sound. When you spoke earlier about *Fur Seal*, you spoke about responding to the sound of the ocean. Over the past several days I reviewed your videotapes in preparation for this talk, and I was listening to the sounds that you used in those videotapes. The sound really carries a narrative in your work in addition to creating atmosphere. But it is interesting that you chose to replace the actual river with music by the Kronos Quartet. I remember reading a transcription of an interview that Yoko Ono did in the early 1960s—when she was studying music—and one of the things that she tried to do was transcribe the sound of the wind into music notation—something one cannot really ever do, as it becomes something else, but that was the concept to writing music. When you started to work with the Kronos Quartet, were you trying to evoke the emotion of the river or were you really trying to bring that sound into a musical rendition?

EIKO: Actually, neither. Kronos Quartet has four people in it, of course, and each person is a different person as much as Koma and I are different people. And of course they have a number of composers. It was never intended that we had to share a common emotion or vision. Nor do we have to share the sound of the river, because each person “hears” the river in their own way. Also each river, as we know from our own caravan for three years, has a very different sound. Some rivers don't have a sound at all if the water is very still. And of course there are birds and frogs and fishes. So the intention was to describe—albeit conceptually—the “flow” of the river. It was just amazing to think that I'm here and that this river will be here long after I die, the same as it has been for so many other people in times past and into the future. That sense of continuation. And in that context, our lives are short. Perhaps pessimistically short, but almost thankfully short. Like every life we go up and down. So that's basically the concept of the whole river. It's not about what is “river”; it's more about how we are always included in the river of life.

So Kronos didn't have anything to do with the real river. It really is more about how the life carried through, and the composer didn't have to think about what we do. The composer had to really create the sense of flow of life, and I think Kronos really brought their own emotions to it, and that's why I really felt very honored to be with them. We didn't have to explain anything to each other and we didn't have to sacrifice our own feelings.

YOKOBOSKY: In your videotape *Husk*, you used sound in a similar way. This was the first videotape that I had seen of yours. It has always been interesting to me how dancers translate their work to video. Most of the time that we see a dance video, it's usually a document or a performance that's recorded on videotape. Taking video and translating it to encompass a performance requires a lot more effort. In this particular piece, Koma, who served as cameraman, obviously understands your movement quite well.

EIKO: Even though we were shouting at each other. Yes. [*Laughter.*]

YOKOBOSKY: The movement of the camera is much more related to the movements that you're performing, than in the majority of "dance videos."

EIKO: Yes, *Husk* was done as a media project and was not intended as a documentation. It was intended as a communication.

YOKOBOSKY: How is it different for you to make a piece for video as opposed to making a piece for a stage or an environment?

EIKO: Well, after some 20 years on the stage, we still haven't seen what we do together. We don't have a director to tell us. One person says we were great. The other person says we were terrible, so it's very hard for us to know what's going on, and that's the fact of it. But videotape is something we can look at. There's a very big difference.

YOKOBOSKY: When you're making a video, do you actually have a monitor where you see yourself moving? Or do you tape yourself, watch, and then re-film?

EIKO: Yes. We use extensive playback as a work process to create media work. We do a little bit of movement, and we see what we did, and we change what we want to change.

YOKOBOSKY: Whereas in the theatre, you're much more reliant perhaps on people coming and giving you criticism and judgments about the theatre performance maybe, which places a lot on trust in the people watching.

EIKO: To a degree. I can only trust so much.

YOKOBOSKY: But you do have a great trust in each other, having worked together for so long.

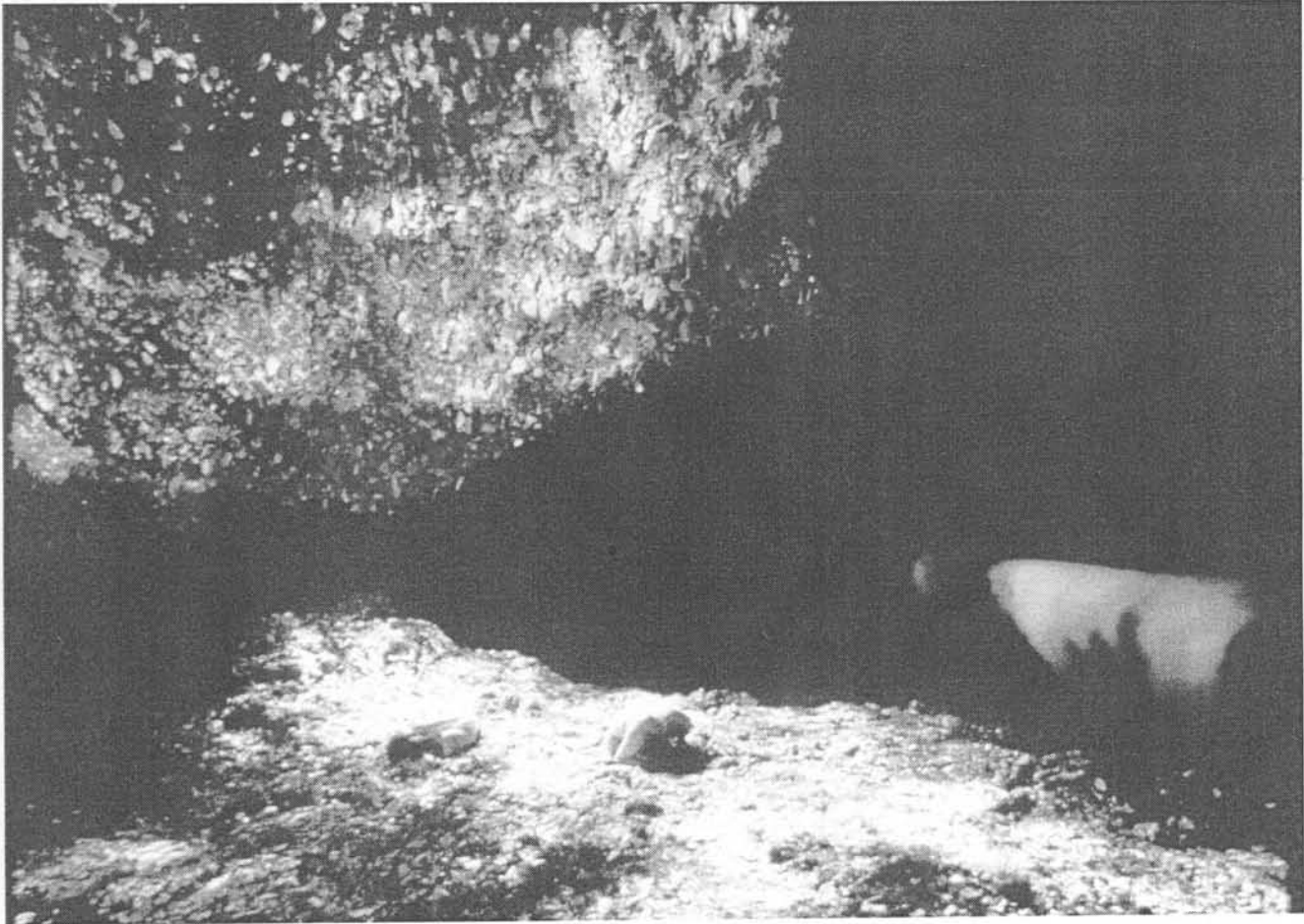
EIKO: Yes, I think we do. Well, it's a combination. As you know, the theatre is a very different animal so to speak. It's very instinctive, and it's a lot of preparation, technically as well as conceptually. Expectations come from both ourselves and the audience. Audiences want to go home in another state of mind after a performance. In the theatre there's a lot of expectation to come to spend an evening to see somebody's work, and we are very aware of it, but we are also very aware of our own expectations. Why we keep performing, what it means to us.

YOKOBOSKY: I was always struck when I saw your live work how visual it is . . . whether you were working in leaves or dirt or lighting. When I first saw you perform—it was at the Kitchen over ten years ago, and I never forgot that performance. It stuck with me for years. An hour went by and then you would move very slowly across the stage, and Koma simultaneously had gradually risen up . . . and then he made a very quick, very loud movement in the back. You were stunned and amazed because you were so concentrated on these very slow micro-movements and then Koma had this very large movement. I came to the Museum after that weekend performance, and I was standing in the gallery and I was thinking, “What would it be like if you took that performance—which is very sculptural because of the kind of movement they choose—and what if you placed it within a museum setting. What would that be like?” And it’s taken ten years, but finally it’s happened. After seeing that and then seeing your videotape. . . and being a curator in the film and video department . . . I had to find a way for us to work together. And the way to do that was through video installation. When we first started to talk about this project, I think Eiko believed that you were going to be creating a set. And I said, “Oh no, we want you in the piece also.”

EIKO: I thought finally somebody is thinking of us as a set designer rather than performing artists.

YOKOBOSKY: Which is a very interesting point because many dancers hire a set designer or a lighting designer to design an environment for them. But here, you created the environment in which you would perform, in which you would respond. When I said to Eiko that the piece would go on for a month, she was very concerned about creating an environment in which she could live and respond to for that long a period of time. You then created an environment in which the floor is covered with leaves and raw silk and the ceiling is draped in a similar material. In the back is a video projection. What’s been extraordinary about this work is that I’ve seen hundreds and hundreds of video installations, and you did something that I hadn’t seen before. And that was to create a video projection which didn’t have a border; there’s no sense of the rectangle, and many people came up afterwards and asked if it was a hologram. You really created something different. What was it like to go through that process of exploring the video projection?

EIKO: When we first came to talk about this installation in November of 1997—having had preliminary talks about three years ago—I had not yet developed respect for Matthew. We hadn’t met. When somebody says installation, that we have to use video, we only took it as O.K. We will just use a little bit to get by, because I was really interested in working in a museum venue. It was more about a social interest so to speak, and a question as to how to physicalize a museum space. But then obligation came with it, and we had to incorporate video. We really had to really think. As I said, video is a medium we had worked with before, but we never wanted to incorporate it within our performance work, because it is a very cool media and performance is a very hot, warm experience.



Eiko (right) and Koma in *Breath* (1998). Photo: Courtesy David Allison.

So, we painted our loft a series of colors, white, yellow, red, and finally black, and then we turned down all the brightness and intensities and everything you could possibly think to do to make, what we felt, was the most fitting video image. Ultimately we created an image that is vaguely seen, not clearly seen. Our intention was to use a video image as a mirage rather than as a creative presentation of something representational, because to us video is clear and beautiful. But how to transform video? It was a trial and error process, and we still haven't quite captured it. But, as with our movement explorations, I think we are in a process that may extend to now, and maybe years. In this installation, the video image is of our bodies, which is along our line of investigation for the last ten years or so—body as landscape. So, instead of having little mountains and hills that we all like to look for, this is a body as a landscape. But, it's not any more my body and it's not any more Koma's body. It's more like ancestral body image.

YOKOBOSKY: I would also like to think about the video from another perspective. In exhibition design, if you're hanging a painting near a video, the painters often complain because they'll say the video captures everyone's attention. It's challenging to focus on a painting when you have something moving in an adjacent space. And here you have two different media moving in space: live bodies and video. How was that relationship and balance achieved?

EIKO: Projecting video as a mirage became like a visit from somebody in your sleep. Sometimes it is coming from our own dreams or sometimes it comes as a surprise. Sometimes it's almost like a friend visiting you. You don't know who is there and you just look up and find out, "Oh, it was you."

KOMA: And remember, Eiko, when we first accepted this engagement of performing in a gallery space, we decided, "O.K. In this production we cannot use music or any other sound like we usually use in the theatre." It might offend other artists because we're right next to the gallery. There are painting exhibitions too. I don't like talking in video though, but usually video has to have some kind of sound. A long, long time ago, in the beginning of our career, we made a video without sound, and at that time people complained, "Oh. No sound."

EIKO: People expect sound.

KOMA: So for this production we thought, "Oh, maybe the video image could work as our sound." Very often we get spirituality from sound, like in a theatre piece from Kronos Quartet or from other people. And maybe when we really get into trouble or when we get lost in the piece, the image could come up in the background or side wall as a little support.

EIKO: And we have to remind ourselves that the title of the exhibition is Breath. And so you don't want to eliminate the concept of the breath with some soundscape. Therefore, we used these waving hills and breathing bodies as a visual soundscape. It's something that your ear doesn't pick up but your eye does.

YOKOBOSKY: Every element of this installation is moving. There are fans, and the leaves are always fluttering. The bodies are moving. The video is moving. You can almost feel the air moving within the space too. It's a very different concept of what we normally think of as an art installation, because it's a complete kinetic world. Listening to you tonight, I am sitting here and thinking about how you always tend to go towards nature in your work—whether it's water or leaves or sand. And it prompts me to think about the land artists from the 1960s and into the 1970s, who were trying to use the landscape as a way of creating form as gesture. And here you take natural materials and form them into other landscapes. They are almost worlds that can't exist in nature. You've created a natural world that is not natural—land art.

EIKO: Yes, that's true.

YOKOBOSKY: And once you've created the environment, you take it and respond to it.

EIKO: Yes, we are similar to the land artists, and also different. When Koma and I go the mountains we are not really thinking, "Let's make this piece out of these mountains." Not at all. We just enjoy being in the mountains. We are not thinking about art. We are just feeling the breeze. I think the reason we use natural materials in the theatre or in an installation is because nature has an infinite vocabulary.

Koma and I started to perform—as we spoke at the beginning—as young adventurers, and we continued because we liked to share our discoveries with an audience. We like what happens to us and what happens to the audience, which may include some dissatisfaction. But what I am getting at is that while performing we have to wear something. Many people wear leotards; we do not like wearing leotards. We just can't breathe in leotards. So, we had to find something to wear. We started to make our own costumes, and sometimes our costumes just got so large that they extended into the realm of setting—a blanket of leaves for example. So we literally started to wear nothing, but the natural environment became our costume.

The real pleasure of making the piece—you know how you visit a friend's house who has very interesting architecture or a tea house or somewhere else with a very different feeling—is that each environment enforces a different manner, another way to behave. If you're visiting a Japanese temple, probably without being told, you don't talk loud, because you intuitively know that it's not the right thing to do. So when Koma and I work on a piece, we don't really choreograph in the sense other choreographers do—using movements and steps. But we make the environment in which certain behaviors are imposed on us. Certain things are acceptable and certain things are not agreeable, just as certain clothes affect us in this environment. So the leaves, water, etc., are all a part of our body extension, which provokes us to move in a certain way. They become both our house and our costume.