

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: William Johnston

Petals on a wet, black bough

by Kirsten Kaschock

Eiko as a body in a station is fragile in a robe of pale yellow, the underside of October's fallen leaves.

Eiko over coffee (factually: a buttered bagel) is warm and engaged, tangential and attentive. She answers questions in constellations of thought, analogy, example. Then she checks in to make certain she has answered the questions. My answer is *yes*. And, *more than*.

Eiko's *A Body in a Station* is a durational performance, a solo work staged in 30th Street Station for three hours at a time on four consecutive Fridays. She enters each week at the time the previous week's work ended. The first, October 3rd, began at noon — the last, October 24th, will end at midnight.

On the first Friday, I arrived late and stood at the edges of the crowd, eventually moving to an abandoned folding chair then standing again to follow Eiko as she exited through the main hall and into the blare and bustle of the city.

She tells me she didn't expect people to walk outside. Once she saw the need to end the piece — beyond physically leaving the station — she took an unplanned bow.

"I didn't want people following me down the street. I had to be the adult."

Eiko in performance — painted a near white, her slight frame and its minimal gestures sometimes unbearably sorrowful — does not appear to have the fortitude to take care of us. Still, I think she is doing just that.

In January of 2013 she reprised [The Caravan Project](#) with [Koma](#), her performing partner of over 40 years, in the lobby of MoMA — both of them available in and around the created space of a mobile trailer during all of the museum's open hours. Eiko remembers children asking their parents, "Is she okay? Should we help her?" She doesn't mind these questions. Her particular physicality invites care. She

is able to offer people the desire: *to help, to be needed*.

She tells me this and I think *yes*. I walk away from her work wanting exactly that. Pondering (*pond*: a mirror deeper than its surface), I realize that I do not — at least I do not want to — resent the demands of being human. Leaving the station, I felt opened again to my interconnectedness with others. Maybe this particular epiphany is as fleeting as performance itself. I felt wakened, especially, to others in need: the aging, the weak, the grieving, the ill.

In 30th Street Station, Eiko lies down on her futon with a waterfall of red scarf, evoking what she calls “an antagonistic posture” to the mainstream — the river of commuters and travelers. She resembles (yet differs from) the homeless who congregate in and around this public space. By extension, the flood of people walking by Eiko without slowing resemble me when I rush past humans asking for aid, when I quicken my pace or narrow my focus, fighting my own desire *to help, to be needed* — convinced I don’t have time to feel.

This is a departure for Eiko. She is performing solo and without Koma, yes, though you can find him among the crowd if you look. She is traveling “light”: few props, make-up, and a musician — [shakuhachi](#) player Ralph Samuelson, who can also fit everything he needs for his haunting, occasional accompaniment into a bag. While in Philadelphia, teaching workshops in the community and at local colleges, Eiko is staying with friends of friends. The “lightness” of the arrangements, the gifts of friendship and rehearsal space (from The University of the Arts where she is an artist-in-residence), and the occasional beer, she says, make her feel “like a teenager.” She adds, “Some people are shocked that I drink beer ... they think I am not of this world.”

Eiko talking is the same Eiko as in performance, but if you only met her through her work, you could be forgiven for thinking her tragic or saintly or both. She is neither, though human frailty may be at the material center of her work. She says she makes art “to save herself.” By entering into the minutiae, the beloved tedium of the artistic process (the analysis of a drifting eye or the video-editing of performance photos into a dialogue with time), she is able to avoid the paralysis of rage or remorse. She is able to move through the absurdity some artists feel making art in [the age of genocide](#). She continues, yet without looking away.

Through the simple presence of her body, she connects 30th Street with other places she has responded to with sustained attentiveness. Specifically — with the abandoned railway stations of Fukushima, Japan.

The first time she traveled through the evacuated area surrounding the [Fukushima-Daiichi power plant](#), Eiko admits she found herself briefly immobilized. Visiting certain sites, like Hiroshima or Auschwitz, she says, “shatters the knowledge you thought you had from history, from reading.”

Photographer William Johnston returned to Japan with her. Together, they created a photo essay of her body in these abandoned locations — [A Body in Fukushima](#) (now on display at PAFA). Her presence along barren roadways and tracks recalls the hundreds of thousands of persons dislocated by the nuclear disaster. But even with this moving photographic documentation, Eiko still wondered “what [she] was doing there other than mourning.”

Nervously, she showed a small selection of the work to a friend, an atomic bomb survivor. She felt a tremendous gratitude when she was told her body allowed the woman to stay with the images longer: to see the place more fully, take in details, imagine the absent.

Eiko offers this — the extension of empathy.

Her vulnerability is powerful. At 30th Street Station, not only has she sheared herself from any partner with whom to share both the intensity and the apathy of the fully-lit watchers and passers-by; she has also given up any contract with her audience. Those who come have not bought tickets or entered a theater or even a museum where expectations are fixed. This audience can watch “for five minutes or for an hour.” Their beginnings, middles, and ends will differ from the trajectory she composed. But Eiko wants to give each onlooker an undeniable sense of her intention. She makes no judgments about the length or quality of their stay, though she admits feeling a

bond with those who stay longer — “strange people liking strange things.”

The balance between the part and the whole in these pieces (*A Body in a Station*, *A Body in Fukushima* — together, *A Body in Places*) is precarious. The Philadelphia station may be more lightly entered (its history less catastrophic, so little baggage to carry in) but this thinness also leaves Eiko exposed.

I find tenuous and beautiful and enigmatic how this woman’s slight body is yet gravitational — organizing the world surrounding it. How a child running at the edge of the crowd becomes her foil: the unwritten to her written, joyous exploration contrasted with questioning hands and faltering steps. How ambient noise and muffled announcements drift through Japanese flute to become a soundtrack of the lost and in-limbo, of those in transit between worlds. How circling photographers become a thread of Eiko’s lifelong conversation with time, how we try to capture it as if it were a wild animal and how “unevenly ... we experience it.”

Durational, Eiko’s work persists through countless entrances and departures. She endures them and us, for us — in surrogate witness. She puts her body through postures of loss so we might extend ourselves at least that far. To see her. To wonder at the weight of the world as it lies both upon her and beneath her, pulling her again and again towards its center: her searching face hovering above the cold tile we traverse so frequently, and so frequently without reflection.

Witnessing Eiko — in witness with Eiko — I find I am able to bear more. And that I want to.

A Body in a Station, Eiko, 30th Street Station, October 3 (12am-3pm), 10 (3-6pm), 17 (6-9pm), 24 (9-12am),
<http://eikoandkoma.org/abodyinastation>.

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