

## On the Road in Korea and Japan

### A beginning in Korea

In the past two years, I've had the pleasure of teaching, choreographing, and performing several times in Asia, especially in SOUTH KOREA. Upon reflection, the most significant insights for me arose in terms of responding to the cultural disorientation I experienced in relation to social dynamics, teaching, and performing.

My exposure to Korean dance began while living and working in Korea for three months in the fall of 2003. I experienced a wide range of contemporary dance works that were instilled with the spirit of Korean traditional dancing, and I began to perceive how this influence and its unique approach to breathing pervades all genres of dance in Korea. The fluctuating range of "free," "held," and "measured" breathing techniques leads to both extremely powerful and very delicate movements. This alternation also effects variation



in compositional dynamics in both choreographed and improvised work. During this 3-month visit in 2003, I taught in the Choreography Department at KNUA, the Korean National University of the Arts in SEOUL, made a group choreography for students of that department, and presented an improvisation research project with graduate students.

In June 2004, I was invited back by the Chang Mu International Dance Festival to create a new production. I worked intensively with three KNUA graduates, Kim Jong Woong, Lee Yun Jung and Son Young Min on *No Usual Angels*, a project emphasizing contact and partnering elements, social dynamics of belongingness and alienation, and compositional approaches I had explored with these dancers during previous visits.

During these visits, I also taught and performed at the friendly seaside city of BUSAN at the southernmost tip of the Korean peninsula. This city, known for its hospitality, international trade, and extraordinary seafood, also has a

thriving dance community and two fine university dance programs. It was in Busan, in my CI workshop, that I met choreographer Shin Eun Ju, whose work explores contemporary reinvention of the traditional dance. Watching her work, I was excited by her dynamic and expressive range. She proposed that we collaborate on a duet project that would explore a dialogue not only between two dancers but also between two very diverse cultural traditions.

Born of this meeting was the project *A Point*. Meeting for rehearsals in BRUSSELS and Busan, we exchanged skills and practices unique to our respective ways of working and danced together in long uninterrupted sets. It was enlivening and inspiring to experience how our very different ways of approaching movement and performance were influencing each other; I found myself able to enjoy a slow, deliberate arising and transforming of imagery such as I had never known before, and I witnessed Shin Eun Ju giving herself over more to shared weight situations and disorientation.

Through the final phase of performing the work in a large theater in Busan in September 2004, the emphasis of our rehearsals centered on taking time to get into a concentrated state and then running the piece as a whole as if it were a performance. The state of intensity and focus that Shin Eun Ju brought to every practice session was a unique, inspiring experience. Through the absoluteness of her involvement, I found myself accessing new degrees of subtlety, absorption, and transparency. There is something characteristic about the Korean traditional dance that is akin to Butoh, trance dancing, and meditation—a quality of deliberation, attention to detail, and concern for texture and imagery. Audience and colleagues alike responded enthusiastically to our production, and we hope to continue to develop it.

### The journey continues in Japan

During an improvisational performance in Brussels, I met Japanese dancer Mikiko Sagawa and saxophonist Katsura Yamauti. The three of us made a special connection performing together, and when they heard that I would be so near Japan in September 2004, they organized a performance and teaching tour that would take us through several Japanese cities on a whirlwind adventure, collaborating with various musicians and other artists, taking classes in Japanese Chi-Gong-like practice, teaching, and as a last touch, meeting costume designer Takahashi Yasuhiro and performing in his traditionally hand-painted kimono.

### The workshops

During the tour, I taught contact improvisation workshops in FUKUOKA and KYOTO. Although there was interest, there was also a great deal of trepidation and fear about the work. It was related to me that there had been various teachers who had passed through and offered workshops with a strong orientation towards basic physical skills such as rolling and the giving of what I call "top-loaded weight." It is not that these skills were wrongly taught, but that, in my observation, the social boundaries and physical sensitivities of the Japanese people required a more delicate entrance into the domain of touch in partner dancing.



It occurs to me that there can be more adaptation and consideration of cultural background and social norms when attempting to put this work forward. Laws of physics and human communication are universal; however, the syntax, semantic forms, and pragmatics of communication and behavior are unique to each cultural milieu. In response to these concerns, I began by working with "mover-partner" forms that focused on encouragement of individual movement patterns and then entering into contact dances where the physical contact was initially limited to one precise fingertip. I found the Japanese dancers able to make very fine discriminations concerning the quality and degree of influence of touch and the amount of weight that was being exchanged.

As a cultural group, they also have a very clear sense of personal boundary. My observation is that when these boundaries are crossed too quickly or roughly, there is an overload of sensation and the person will often become disoriented in the communication of touch—the contact surface will become erratic, slippery, or otherwise discontinuous. When this happened, the dance would often destabilize to the point where it was difficult for either partner to make clear choices or continue in a way that served to bring forward enjoyment, discovery, or communication. The order of the dance would degenerate into that of self-preservation and a pulling away from listening to what was happening at the contact surface.

The work with limited touch assisted people in slowly building trust and both realizing and softening their personal touch boundaries. Through other progressive steps, we moved into greater ranges of partnering exploration. It is my contention that the more Contact and Partnering improvisation relates to and embraces cultural differences, the more it will become a truly relevant tool for individual growth and artistic development in the global community.

### The performances



Throughout the two-week tour in Japan, we gave performances in jazz clubs, retreat centers, and alternative music venues in six Japanese cities, including Fukuoka, OSAKA, and Kyoto. We worked with Japanese improvisational musicians Katsura Yamauti, Daisuke Takaoka, Akiko, and Take-bow. The music possessed textural and tonal elements that created a trance-like state that kept us and the audience immersed in an extraordinary journey. To dance with the music was ecstatic. Along with our duet work, Mikiko performed alone to a solo composition of Take-bow's, entitled Solitude. To witness the subtle dialogue of Asian and occidental influence playing out in their work gave rise to a feeling of belongingness in something more than any singular cultural perspective might offer alone.

With audiences who had senses for the subtlety of Butoh and the Noh Theater, I experienced a shared awareness of the arising and fading of imagery as never before. I realized in an immediate way the potential for growth and richness in intercultural dialogue and was thankful for the opportunity to be part of this exchange and communication.

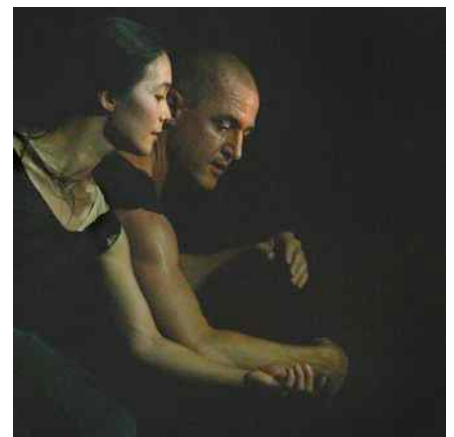
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### The Critique: “A Point” September 17 and 18, 2004 Choreography: Shin Eun Ju and Kurt Koegel

Renowned as one of the most eminent dancers leading the moves of contemporary dance in Korea and adding splendor to the name of Busan-based dance, Eunju Shin staged a new note-worthy performance, ‘EUNJU SHIN’s DANCE’, at the Grand Theater of Geumjeong Culture Center on September 17 and 18, 2004. Among the three independent works choreographed and orchestrated by Eunju Shin, *A Point* was seen to be the most outstanding and finest artwork of all, which was a duet dance crafted in collaboration with Kurt Koegel, a Belgium-based contemporary dancer.

In this, Eunju Shin’s world of dance seeks a new open dimension at an encounter with another dance characteristic of a texture rather unfamiliar with hers: in a dark and shadowed space, Eunju Shin and Kurt Koegel are found placed on two respective platforms aslope, each taking the right and left sides of the stage. Departing from these platforms that are designated as his and her sovereign spaces, Eunju Shin and Kurt Koegel gradually move downward and toward each other, and, in this process of rising and encountering, they both reveal a mastery of articulate slowness and dance perceptiveness as if they are fully relishing the flow of time.



While breathing in the shared sense of slow yet intensive perception, the two dancers paint the moments both in unique and colorful ways of their own. Eunju Shin crafts a dance texture of tautness and elasticity from within, while Kurt Koegel generates a texture of tranquil and free movements in which he liberates any rigid physical, metaphoric interface with ease. The interrelatedness of the two different dance textures forms a unique style of visual narration on the surface of the flesh, in which, of course, the surface is already at a level of deep, inner structure and becomes representative as a signifier of dance. From a passing to a *rendez-vous*, to a crisscross, and back to a warm encounter, all their interactive moves exhibit a well-balanced sequence that is as natural as breathing, and it is all based on the feelings and sensations of the flesh.

Some noticeable traits in their performance are that Kurt Koegel attains a soft and serene color range of improvisation—regardless of his gender—while Eunju Shin presents another distinctive color range: a combination of a strong, deeply-centered energy, characteristic of a hard-disciplined woman, with a very sophisticated breathing style. In addition, in some *touché ensemble* moments of their creation, when Eunju Shin has control, all of gravity bursts into full sway toward her body—a very quick and brief change in locomotion. As a whole, it is a very intriguing performance thanks to the orientation and sharing of internal energy, and amounts to a brilliant piece of artistic radiance.

Written by Namsu Kim, dance critic  
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