

Dance

Now you see her, now you don't

Koosil-ja plays with the idea of physical presence in *Dance Without Bodies*.

By Gia Kourlas

Over the years, Koosil-ja, a Korean choreographer who grew up in Osaka, Japan, has created dances that focus on her confusion surrounding cultural identity. More recently, however, she has initiated a shift in her choreographic desire: Entranced by how technology can transform the dancing body, she wants, beyond anything, to make something new. Easier said than done. But in *Dance Without Bodies*, which will be performed at the Kitchen, she is perhaps closer than she's ever been.

In the new production, Koosil-ja (who only uses her first name) relies upon a dance technique that she calls "live processing." Inspired by her experience working with the Wooster Group, where performers watch monitors that screen videos of other actors or dancers while they perform, Koosil-ja has created three source videos for her new work, a duet with Melissa Guerrero. Source one features clips from films, such as *A Raisin in the Sun* and *Akira*; source two is documentation of Koosil-ja and Guerrero improvising, seen by the choreographer as a bridge between the past and the future; and source three focuses on the animated body—the awkward, nonrepresentational figures found in video games.

"Maybe the memory of my training prevents me from doing something I have never done before," Koosil-ja says over coffee. "So to bring myself to something unfamiliar, I wanted to have sources outside of my head. It's the Wooster Group's way of using an actor's track and altering it in a way that becomes, for me, an externalized dancer's mind." In other words, if a dancer was a computer, the live-processing technique would be its external memory. "The TVs and you form a new body," she adds, "so it's almost like growing a nervous system outside of your skin that extends and connects with the monitors."

Guerrero and Koosil-ja perform exactly what they see onscreen, beginning with source one, then adding sources two and three as best they can—though even Koosil-ja



HIDE AND SEEK Koosil-ja pushes past her own boundaries.

admits that it's nearly impossible to achieve (they have been practicing for the past 18 months). "It's not about being right or wrong, it's about how well you can connect with the image," she says. "It's almost like developing a tactile sensibility; you have to read off the video image. It's not like reading words, it's about scanning and doing it. Even the most intense emotional gesture that can be universally read as agony—she places her hands on her face and mimics a soundless scream—for us, it's hands on the cheek. We don't speak emotions, we just dance the movement."

For the new dance and mixed-media work, Koosil-ja has divided the Kitchen's space in half. The audience, split into two rows and sitting back to back, divides the stage; each will perform in front of a row, occasionally dancing with the other (and, in turn, leaving a

performance area empty) or switching places. Video cameras on either side will capture images from

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both sections of the stage; footage will be screened on walls facing the audience. The point, according to Koosil-ja, is that "the space that you don't see is continuing." Consequently, the performance space will become as fluid as the dance.

Koosil-ja is also inspired by the ideas of philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (specifically, their

concept of a "body without organs"), which she almost regards as a silent dialogue in her choreographic process. "In Europe, I would have a dramaturge to do this kind of thing," she says, laughing. "My way is free and affordable." While she maintains that she has likely misunderstood Deleuze and Guattari's writings, there is one passage about identity that led her to consider notions of societal coding as it relates to a dancer's training. "My research is not about me being academic, it's about making a dance and creating movement that pushes me beyond what I have studied or watched before," she says. "This was a desperate attempt to do something that I haven't done before. In a way I am putting myself at risk: the risk to create something new."

Koosil-ja is at the Kitchen Wed 6 through Dec 9.